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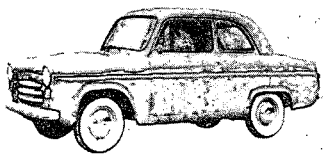

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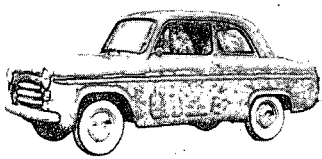

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WADE MILLER**

TITLE: ***A Bad Time of Day***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Sergeant Dunn

LOCALE: An American city — perhaps yours

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Sergeant Dunn of the Traffic Division knew he was not a thinker. He called himself a "feeler" — he had a "cop mind," which is a valuable asset in a case not quite dark and not quite light. A probing, fascinating tale.*

SQUINTING CURIOUSLY IN HIS REAR-view mirror, Les Bagby slowed his big car. But hard as he strained his eyes through his gold-rimmed glasses, he could see nothing in the fluffy dusk on the quiet avenue behind him. Odd, he thought, I could have sworn that . . .

A police prowl car nosed out of the cross street half a block ahead of him. Bagby pulled to the curb and, a worried frown on his forehead, got out to inspect the front of his automobile.

The prowl car stopped alongside him. The officer at the wheel looked him over impersonally, then asked, "Something wrong?"

Bagby hesitated. "No, I guess not. I thought, back there a couple of houses, that somebody threw a rock at me. A kid or somebody."

"Yeah?" The cop and his partner slid out of their car and ambled across the street. They peered back the way Bagby had come, to the sleepy residential avenue. Tall eugenia bushes, heavy with berries, hedged the curbs on both sides. The street lamps were only now coming on, two every block, but it wasn't yet dark enough for their light to shine brightly. "Nothing," decided one of the cops. "A bad time of day to see anything. Do any damage?"

"I didn't notice any," said Bagby. The two policemen seemed all taut muscle in their khaki uniforms, and he felt small and nervous at having

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stirred them up. "It might have been a bump in the road, what I felt."

One cop was scrutinizing the front grillework. He got out his flashlight. "Take a look. That wasn't caused by any bump in the road." Close to the right fender, the chrome grille was dented and there was a crack at one edge of the headlight glass.

"Then I guess it was a rock, after all."

"Sizable rock," mused the cop. "See if we can find it." He and his partner, with Bagby trailing them, tramped along the curb, exploring the dusk with their flashlight beams. "You say you didn't actually see anyone?"

"Not a soul. I was just cruising along, going home. No traffic, and I was thinking about a policy I'm writing up. I didn't have my lights on yet." Bagby was a man who became upset easily, and he was becoming increasingly nervous over the trouble he was causing. Now he was sorry he had stopped at all. As much as he enjoyed the bigness and shininess of his car, he didn't care this much about a mere dent in the grille.

"Something out there in the street," said one of the cops, angling away.

The other one said to Bagby, conversationally, "Could be some teenage gang pitched something at your car. We never know what neighborhoods they'll swarm through next."

"I didn't intend making any trouble," Bagby apologized. "The damage is covered, naturally. I'm in the insurance business."

"Hey," said the first cop from the street. "It's a woman's shoe."

He turned the white high-heeled pump over in his hand. "New," he muttered. His flashlight began to swing in slow circles over the pavement, seeking something more.

"I don't get it," complained Bagby. "Why would anybody throw a shoe at me — particularly a new shoe . . . Good God!"

The beam of light had found another target. It came to rest on a second white shoe, the mate of the first. But this one still remained on its owner's foot, where she sprawled in the shadowy embrace of a eugenia hedge along the curb. From her awkward position and her terrible stillness, Les Bagby knew that the woman was irrevocably dead. And he trembled at the full cold realization that he had killed her.

"Killed instantly," announced the police surgeon. He turned away from the examination table and began to roll down his sleeves. "Apparently, anyway. Understand, you'd better qualify all my statements until I can find time for an autopsy."

"Good enough for me," said Sergeant Dunn, chewing reflectively. He was the Traffic Division's investigating officer, a dark and burly young plainclothesman. Only his eyes were old and ringed with thought. He had been called away from the dinner table to take charge of the case and his jaws still moved in memory of what he had missed.

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The surgeon put on his coat. "I'd say immediate cause of death was skull fracture, probably when she struck the pavement." He rubbed his hands together as he turned toward the door and home. "When are we ever going to get some decent heat in here?"

"I heard the budget man say it would be cheaper to get a warm-blooded doctor." The basement was low and brightly lit, white-tiled and white-furnished. It was an underground cavern that never seemed warm enough. Dunn said, "Well, Mr. Bagby, have you thought of anything you can add?"

Bagby shook his head. He couldn't take his eyes off the dead woman. She had been young and blonde and probably pretty, although the facial lacerations made it difficult to be certain.

Dunn said, "And you can't help us identify her?"

A complete stranger, thought Bagby. Where was she going? Where had she been? Now, for her, it was ended . . . It occurred to him that he wasn't answering aloud. He said huskily, "No, I never saw her before."

Dunn pulled the sheet up over her face. Now she was less real, only an inanimate shape. The sergeant said, not unkindly, "Feeling a little sick, huh? I don't blame you."

"I've never been in a morgue before. One of those places I thought might be interesting to see some day, but not . . ." Bagby wiped perspiration from his upper lip. "I've never even been inside a police station before."

They went upstairs to the Traffic office where the atmosphere was a little better. Bagby slumped gratefully onto a bench.

Dunn rummaged on his desktop for the accident report. He read it through again. "Cigarette?" he offered absently.

"I don't smoke," murmured Bagby. He added in a strained voice, "I've led a blameless life" — then flushed at the pompous sound of it.

Dunn looked at him. "I don't think anyone's going to blame you for this accident. Time was approximately six thirty. It's a moot point whether you should have had your headlights on or not, or how much they'd have helped if they had been on. That's a bad time of day — not dark, not light. That kind of half light is deceptive, and people are tired at the end of a day."

"I know," said Bagby. "Probably as well as you do, Sergeant. Being in insurance, I've read the mortality tables and breakdowns a hundred times. It's a lot different when it happens to you, though."

"Well, you know what the tables prove. It can happen to anyone. Nobody's got a monopoly, though some groups are more prone than others. Funny how the traffic accidents run in streaks, in different localities. One town will go heavy on four-year-old boys falling into granite quarries. This town, it seems to be women pedestrians." Dunn shook his head

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regretfully. "Too bad. She was about my wife's age, twenty-something."

Nevertheless, Bagby thought, it was my doing. He wished he did smoke. It would give him something to do with his hands.

Dunn said, "She wasn't carrying any identification. Might mean she was just stepping over to see a neighbor and didn't bother to take a purse. We're running a door-to-door check. Her ankle bracelet was engraved Madge. Oh, we'll find out who she was, in practically no time. That's the only thing holding us up."

"I never saw her," said Bagby. "I was over on the east side of town, writing a policy. I was just heading home — to the west side where I live. Fremont Apartments. I don't even know anyone in that neighborhood."

"We checked all that out," Dunn assured him. "And if I could fill in the victim's name on this report, you'd be home by now. Realize, we're not holding you for anything, Mr. Bagby. You weren't traveling at excessive speed, and it wasn't hit-and-run since you were already coming to a stop when our prowl car came along. You were wearing your glasses as required by your driver's license and we've checked your vision out okay. The girl was wearing a dark dress and I understand there's a lot of shrubbery along that block. She probably didn't see you coming, stepped right out into the street. People just won't bother with the regular crosswalks, especially in residential districts. So, technically, you're free to go any time. Practically, it's to your advantage to wait around."

"How do you mean? I want to do anything that's right, any help I can be."

"A complete accident report is to your benefit. I don't see that we're going to charge you with anything criminal. But the relatives — if any — might try to make out a civil case for damages. That's when the official report might be a help to you. But you're free as a bird — you can go now."

"I'll wait around," said Bagby.

"I've got to get going now. Feel free to use my phone — call your wife if you want to."

"I'm not married. Never have been."

"One of the lucky ones," said Sergeant Dunn, not really meaning it. He stuffed the accident report in his coat pocket and left.

Bagby sat numbly on the bench. He tried not to think of the girl on the table downstairs and not to look at, or even listen to, the ticking wall clock. Free as a bird, but he felt like a side of meat on a hook.

It was completely dark by the time Sergeant Dunn arrived at the scene of the accident. The prowl car was still parked there, and one of the uniformed officers was waiting for further instructions, while his partner tramped from house to house. Dunn listened to the cop's version of the accident. It matched the facts on the report in his pocket.

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"No skid marks," he commented, studying the pavement by flashlight. "Bagby didn't hit his brakes hard either before or after he struck her. That adds up. A real fast stop would have shown he knew he'd hit her, and blown his hit-by-a-rock story skyhigh."

The cop grunted in surprise. "Why, you think he —?"

"I'm no thinker," said Dunn. "I'm a feeler." That's about the size of it, he told himself. Human beings and their accidents don't always make sense. Give a policeman training and experience, and let him feel his way through things. Or maybe it was a form of thought down in his subconscious that raced ahead of his conscious reasoning, without letting him in on the process. All Dunn knew was that his brain often took a leap into the dark and came up with a suggestion he wasn't ready for yet. Intuition, the cop mind. And, like any cop, Dunn prized his hunches. Hunches got promotions. Hunches got him home in time to kiss the kids good night and talk to his wife . . . He wandered along the curb with his flashlight.

"What're you looking for, Sarge?"

"Your partner isn't back yet."

"No, he covered both sides of the street, and now he's around on the other side of the block."

"So the victim didn't live too close by. So the victim was dressed nice enough to be carrying a purse." He gave a cluck of triumph, feeling like a magician. "Hole in the hedge. Here's what we want." He reached into the dense foliage of the eugenia bushes and drew out a woman's handbag. "Impact sailed it about thirty feet."

Dunn examined the purse, which contained a vast collection of feminine paraphernalia. It was made of white plastic material, snap-fastened, and was a little smaller than a brief case.

"Here's her identification," said Dunn, opening the wallet. Margaret Lee Mercer, age twenty-three, married, a local resident. Some sales tags indicated that she was employed by the Peacock Fashion Shop, downtown. There was a snapshot of the victim with a rugged young man, and another of the victim with a brunette young woman. The wallet also contained four dollars, some change, and two bus tokens. Dunn used the prowl car radio to relay this information to headquarters.

"Which about wraps it up, let's hope," said the cop.

Dunn was frowning at the purse. The other policeman came back from his tour of the neighborhood. "Got half an identification a block south of here," he reported. "But the woman only knows her as Madge who works at the Peacock Fashion Shop. She stopped by there tonight to drop off a formal — a rush job. We can check —"

"We got it," said Dunn. "So from the delivery she was on her way home. That would account for the bus tokens. The bus line runs down the next street north, doesn't it? Still . . ." He fell silent, frowning.

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"What?" prompted one of the cops.

"Don't rush me," snapped Dunn. He walked back to where Margaret Lee Mercer's body had come to rest. "Didn't mean to sound off but I haven't had dinner yet," he said. "Look at this purse. Practically the size of a flag and pure white. I can understand why a driver wouldn't see her white shoes. But why didn't Bagby see this big white purse?"

"If she was right-handed, the purse would have been on the other side of her body from him."

"Granted. But this is a young slender girl. She couldn't hide this thing if she wanted to. Besides, she was walking along, probably hurrying to get home, swinging her arms some. Why, even at dusk, this thing would have looked like a semaphore."

"Hit and run?" suggested one of the cops softly.

"Bagby didn't run. He stopped. How fast was he going?"

"Under twenty-five when we saw him, and definitely slowing down."

"No reason he should lie when he's in the clear." Pondering, Dunn picked one of the dark red berries from a cluster on the eugenia bush. He squeezed it between his fingers. In the gloom, the smear of juice looked like blood. "What if Bagby didn't see the purse because she wasn't carrying the purse? I'm just dreaming out loud, you understand. But what if this purse *wasn't* knocked down there into the bushes — but was *hidden* in the bushes?"

He suddenly ordered, "Bring your car up alongside the curb here." One of the officers, puzzled, did so. With the purse under his right arm, Dunn stood at the break in the hedge where the dead woman presumably had started across the street. "Can you see me all right?"

"Sure, I can see you," said the officer behind the wheel. "Why?"

"Just dreaming up possibilities." Dunn bent nearly double in front of the prowl car. "Can you see me now?"

"Not very well. But what would she be traveling like that for?"

"She wouldn't," said Dunn, straightening. "Unless her skull had already been fractured by some other means, and somebody shoved her out into the street just as Bagby drove by."

The two cops stared at him and one of them cleared his throat. "What're you building up, Sarge?"

"I've got a murder feeling," said Dunn. He added, almost sheepishly, "At least, I can't think of any other answer."

Les Bagby still sat on the bench in the Traffic office. At his right hand there was a closed door. Through the door he could hear footsteps ring by in the corridor outside, and shadows passed back and forth on the frosted glass pane. It was as if the world were passing him by, judging him unworthy of attention. I'm in here, waiting, he cried to the strangers silently.

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What if it had been he who had died tonight? What had he accomplished in his life so far? Oh, he'd had his little adventures, and in some years had set the sales record for his office — but was there anything he could be truly proud of?

His spirits had never been so low. Every time a footstep slowed or a shadow lingered on the pane, he was reminded of the guards who came to take a condemned man to the death house.

Now why am I thinking things like that? he scolded himself. I don't have to worry; Sergeant Dunn himself said that. Still . . . his mind skipped unaccountably to a television drama he had seen a few nights before. An average little man, without friends or influence, had been caught in a gigantic trap of circumstances that closed on him, slowly, crushingly . . .

"Nonsense!" he said aloud, angrily. "That's not me. That's nothing like me." He was getting very tired. It was hard to remember what life was like before he had begun this interminable waiting. The thrill of success when he turned a prospect into a client, the surge of power when he drove his big car, the embrace of enveloping peace when he came home to his apartment . . .

His gaze, seeking a physical focus, found the telephone. He was free to use it — Sergeant Dunn had said so. But he knew no one worth calling. He was alone. For the first time in years, Les Bagby found himself wishing there were someone alive who deeply cared about him. If he were married . . . He shook his head sadly. He knew something about the world as it was. A woman didn't always spring to the side of a man in trouble.

He wrenched his eyes away from the telephone, and then found himself looking at the calendar behind Dunn's desk. The picture on the calendar was a pinup girl. She posed in her bathing suit and stared back at Bagby, bold and cute. He thought the calendar was the epitome of bad taste. Somehow he was reminded of the girl downstairs.

He removed his gaze from the calendar girl in distaste, and that left him almost nothing to look at but the huge clock ticking on the wall. What was taking so long? Where was Sergeant Dunn, anyhow?

Dunn was trotting up the steps to headquarters. He went in to see the desk sergeant. "Did you check out that information on the Mercer woman?"

"What do you think, I loaf?"

"Get anything?"

"Enough. She's been separated three months from her husband, Robert W. Mercer, draftsman at Vulcan Aircraft. She's been sharing an apartment with her sister, Evelyn Lee, unmarried carhop. The sister's on her way down here now to make the identification."

"No connection with Bagby, I suppose?"

"No, the sister never heard of him."

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The desk sergeant blinked. "Should there be?"

"No. Just feeling around. What's all this sister stuff? A carhop should be on duty at this hour. And why didn't the husband come down?"

"Can't locate him. Landlady says he hasn't shown up yet."

"Well, keep after him." Dunn started toward his office.

The desk sergeant called him back. "Times when you push too hard, Brother Dunn. You didn't even give me a chance to tell you that the lab wants to see you. Our geniuses claim they've turned up something offkey."

Dunn grinned. "That makes it unanimous."

Bagby heard the footsteps approach the door to Traffic, then retreat again. He was tense and, when nobody came in, he found it impossible to relax. Every muscle of his body was pulling wire-tight. He swallowed hard and massaged his palms together. They were slick with moisture.

Take it easy, he begged himself; you're getting yourself into a panic, and for no reason.

Yet he was merely one small man and the law was so huge and impersonal. It marched back and forth in the corridor and never showed its face. He dried his hands on his handkerchief and giggled suddenly. So this is what they meant by "sweating it out."

He pressed his knuckles hard against his mouth so that he wouldn't giggle hysterically again. Oh, my God, what have I done? he wondered. Is this what can come from the minor act of stopping your car? I should have kept on driving — anything, taking any chance would be better than this. If I hadn't stopped, I wouldn't be here sweating over nothing. Curiosity killed the cat. If only I had not been curious.

In a way, he was praying. All he wanted was to go home in peace. For that, he would have sworn never to drive his car again . . .

The lab technician blew arrogantly on his hornrim spectacles and began to polish them. "I got a prize for you," he told Dunn. "We processed the front of Bagby's automobile as you commanded — excuse me — requested."

"Funny man," said Dunn, but he smiled happily. "Keep talking."

"Well, I will say it's a pleasure to work on a well-kept car." The lab man put on his glasses and turned serious. "We found five strands of the Mercer woman's hair on the radiator grille. Okay, that's to be expected. But here's the strange bit. I probed the crevice *behind* the grille, looking for another sample."

"What'd you find?"

"Another sample. But the dead woman is a blonde, like the first five hairs. Sample Number Six is definitely brunette."

"Maybe she bleached her hair," Dunn suggested. "My wife's always threatening to."

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"No. I did a microscopic examination and there's no similarity in texture. It's definitely another hair type altogether. It's a woman's hair, all right, but it's not from the victim's head." The lab technican shrugged expansively. "That's the scientific word, boy. I can't begin to suggest an explanation for it."

"I can," said Dunn slowly. "Maybe two explanations."

Les Bagby sprang to his feet as Sergeant Dunn entered the Traffic office. The insurance man's face was pale, his mouth was dry, and he couldn't speak for a moment. Dunn smiled in greeting and went to the telephone. He asked the desk sergeant, "Has Mrs. Mercer's sister shown up yet? The carhop?" He was told she had, but that the husband hadn't yet been located. "Ask her to wait a few minutes." Dunn hung up.

The Traffic Division detective sat on the edge of his desk and regarded Les Bagby apologetically. "Sorry I took so long. I know this isn't the most entertaining office in the world, but the investigation turned out more complicated than I expected."

"Oh?" croaked Bagby, as if his worst dream had come true. "There isn't anything wrong, is there? Isn't everything all right?"

"Not exactly. Sit down a moment, won't you, please?" Bagby did, then pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his hands. The sergeant took out cigarettes and offered one. Bagby shook his head, still waiting.

Dunn said, "Well, I know who she is — or was. Mrs. Margaret Lee Mercer. But it didn't end there."

Margaret Lee Mercer. Bagby searched his memory. No, he'd never heard of anyone by that name. He couldn't remember any Mercer even among his clients.

Dunn said, "When I got to the scene of the accident, I began tripping over discrepancies — facts that didn't quite jibe. I can swallow one discrepancy, maybe two — but three make me gag. First, there was the purse. Mrs. Mercer was carrying a big white purse, a real billboard of a purse. It should have shown up like a stoplight, even at dusk. Yet you didn't see her step out in front of your car."

"No, I didn't," Bagby insisted hoarsely. "I swear I didn't."

"Second, you say you were driving within the residential speed limit, twenty-five miles an hour. But I found her purse buried in the eugenia bushes at least thirty feet beyond the body. It would take more impact than twenty-five miles per to fling her heavy purse that far. So one explanation might be that you were going faster than you say you were."

"No," said Bagby, sitting up straighter. "No, absolutely not."

"Third and finally, the lab found another woman's hair on your car's grillework. Yes, we found some of Mrs. Mercer's blonde hair but there was also a brunette hair from some unknown woman. Three facts that don't quite match the official report." Dunn took the unfinished form out of

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his coat pocket and tossed it on the desk. "So how are we going to explain these discrepancies?"

"I don't know," said Bagby miserably.

"Let's approach it this way," suggested Dunn. "Let's suppose you did kill her with your car. You hit her going fast and then you slowed down. Were you looking back to see what you'd done?"

"But I stopped!" Bagby protested. "You know I did!"

"You stopped when you saw the prowl car coming. You stopped and told them a story about somebody maybe throwing a rock. That kept you clear of a hit-and-run charge, in case the prowl car cops had seen anything. Oh, they saw you slowing down, all right. But did you really intend to stop — before you noticed there were cops there?"

"Yes," said Bagby. He was trembling. He caught hold of his knees and made his whole body rigid, trying to recover some of his dignity. It wasn't fair for the police, taking advantage of their badges, to beat a man down this way. Wasn't there any courtesy left in the world?

"That," said Sergeant Dunn flatly, "would take care of two of three discrepancies. You are a hit-and-run who thought fast. But we're left with discrepancy Number Three — the brunette hair that doesn't belong to Mrs. Margaret Lee Mercer."

Les Bagby almost fell off the bench in relief. He said timidly, "May I suggest something? I'm in this spot, I think I've got a right to. Maybe the hair was on this Mrs. Mercer's clothing. Maybe that's how it got on my car, along with her own. Maybe she was shoved into the street in front of my car, already dead. That might be why I didn't see her. Maybe I didn't knock the purse all that way into the bushes. It could have been hidden there by whoever killed her, or maybe it fell there during a struggle. It doesn't have to be *my* car that fractured her skull — it could have been a club or a monkey wrench or something. She could have been struggling with another woman — say, a brunette woman who killed her, and that's how the brunette hair got on her dress. Then the brunette woman saw my car coming and shoved her out in the street so that it would look like an accident. Couldn't it have happened that way?"

Dunn smiled and shook his head. "You know, I'm not as dumb as you might think. I thought of all those possibilities. I strained hard to think of them, and in due course I decided they were all a bunch of malarkey. We both have a lot of imagination, Mr. Bagby."

"I don't like being treated this way! Making me wait half the night —"

"Do you want to admit to manslaughter or what? We've got several choices."

Bagby gripped his knees hard. It wasn't fair! "I don't have to be treated like this!" he cried. "Listen to me for a change. Why should I bow down to

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you? It doesn't make any great difference to anyone whether or not I knew she was dead. If I'd just kept driving, I'd never have been noticed and I wouldn't be here now having to put up with this. I wouldn't even have been noticed — I'm all alone in the world, no one knows what I'm really like. Nobody cares about me, especially not any women." His mouth curled in distaste. "People get killed every day, don't you even know that? Their sins catch up with them. I've got the figures right in my brief case, if you'd ever give me back my briefcase. It's in my car — yes, what are you doing with my car?" He half rose off the bench, his eyes shining passionately. "Why are you making such a big thing out of this, anyway? She wasn't anybody that matters. Just another woman. Who are you to decide that she didn't deserve to be killed? I bet she didn't have any business out on the streets. Where was she heading for at that time of day, anyway? Flaunting her body . . . no decent woman would start out at dark, not one of them is worth all this fuss and making me wait. Where was she going, anyway? She was probably nothing more than a street-walker . . ."

The words flooded out from his moist lips, barely in ordered succession, like a faucet that he was unable to close.

Dunn, standing before him in a position of respectful attention, listened calmly until at last Bagby ran down. Bagby covered his face with his hands, shaking. Dunn sighed. He remembered the single brunette hair, from the unknown woman.

It was the hunch, cop intuition. His mind then took its wild leap into the dark. Dunn asked quietly, "Now tell me, Mr. Bagby — how many other women have you killed this way?"

Bagby uncovered his face. He drew a deep nervous breath but he straightened proudly. "You mean, over the years?" he asked. "Nine."

NEXT MONTH . . .

Winner of a Second Prize —

RUFUS KING's *Miami Papers Please Copy*

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?

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

DAVE WARD PULLED THE SHEET over his head in a futile gesture meant to dematerialize the ringing telephone. The bell had a frightening sound and it was summoning him to awake and face a frightening world — a world in which he was about to lose his job, his wife, and the veneer of brashness that he called his self-confidence. He definitely did not want to wake up; another hour of sleep might blunt the aching edge of his hangover.

The telephone jangled on pitilessly.

From beneath a heap of covers in the other twin bed, Katy Ward complained drowsily: "For heaven's sake, Dave, either answer it or knock it off on the floor."

Dave groped for the instrument.

"Tom?" said a woman's voice. It was a breathless voice, unsteady as though with excitement — or fear. "Is that you, Tom?"

Dave groaned. "This is not Tom," he said. "Or Dick. Or Harry either."

"Isn't this Broadway 7-4475?"

"Try again. This is Broadway 7-4476. And will you —?"

"Please don't hang up. Please!" The woman's voice was desperate. "I'm in awful trouble. Will you do me a favor?"

"No," said Dave, but he didn't hang up. The note of panic in the unknown voice seemed genuine enough. He was suddenly intrigued.

"Please!" the frantic voice went on. "My handbag was stolen just outside the phone booth and this is my only dime. Luckily I had the dime in my hand. Won't you please call Broadway 7-4475 and tell Tom that Isabel Connell is waiting for him in front of the cigar store at Thirty-ninth and First Avenue? Tell him I haven't even bus fare. It's terribly important. Will you?"

"All right, Isabel." Dave sighed. "Just for you."

"Thanks so much. It really is important. You won't forget? Thirty-ninth and First."

"Right away, Isabel. It will be my good deed for today." Dave hung up. He glanced at the clock on the night table. Four o'clock. The drawn window shades were fringed with bright sunlight, so Dave assumed it was four in the afternoon. He leaned back against his pillow and closed his eyes again.

"Who phoned?" his wife asked.

"Wrong number," Dave said.

"What did Isabel want?"

"She wants me to call Tom. Somebody stole her bag and she got a wrong number with her last dime." Dave lay motionless.

"Be a good boy and call Tom for Isabel," Katy said.

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With a great effort Dave propped himself on one elbow and spun the dial. He heard the ringing at the other end. After a dozen rings he hung up.

"Tom is not home," he announced.

"Maybe you're not dialing very clearly this morning," said his wife.

Dave tried again. He concentrated on every turn of the dial. He counted twenty rings.

"Tom is a cad," he reported. "Poor Isabel has been stood up."

"Then make us some coffee."

"In my delicate condition? Please!"

Katy clucked reprovingly, pulled a red négligée around her sun-tanned shoulders, and crossed the room to the closet that housed the kitchenette in violation of all municipal health and fire ordinances.

Dave gasped gently several times like a freshly-caught sea-robin, then swung his long legs out of bed. As he propelled his well-proportioned two hundred pounds toward the bathroom, he stepped gingerly over the litter of morning papers on the floor, as though the dramatic reviews of last night's opening might soil his bare feet. The notices were unanimously abusive. Despite the concentrated drinking he had done to erase them from his memory, he remembered them almost word for word. He could quote the *Herald Tribune's* by heart: "Ben Smock last night again demonstrated his unerring instinct for mistaking bad slapstick for light summer farce. Unless this critic's judgment has been seriously impaired by the heat and the punishment inflicted from the stage of the Lorimer Theatre last night, *The Affairs of Gwendolyn* will close this week . . ."

Dave slammed the bathroom door and turned on the shower.

When he emerged a few minutes later, Katy was back in bed, drinking coffee. She looked maddeningly healthy. She always did. No matter how strenuous the night before or

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for the best title for this story!

Just fill in your title suggestion on the coupon on page 18 or on a separate sheet of paper. . . . Entries must be in by September 20, 1956 and the prize of $100 will be awarded by October 20, 1956. . . . Entries will be judged on the basis of aptness and effectiveness of title. . . . The winning title will be selected by the editorial staff of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine and their decision will be accepted as final; in case of a tie duplicate prizes will be awarded. . . . No entries can be returned. . . . This contest is open to everyone except employees of Mercury Publications, and their families.

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how little she had slept, she had the amazing quality of waking up fresh as a cosmetics ad. Even her wavy amber hair was as well groomed as if she had just stepped from a beauty shop. Katy was a swell girl, and the thought that he was losing her eclipsed momentarily the misery of his hangover, the bitter taste of the *Gwendolyn* flop, and the newly-intriguing image of the unknown Isabel, frantically waiting for a faithless Tom who didn't even know where she was.

"Where are you going?" Katy asked, as Dave stepped into his fawn-colored slacks, neatly draped to minimize his incipient equatorial bulge.

"Out — for the afternoon papers."

"You're wasting time and money." Katy spoke with a slow, pleasantly-deliberate voice that was two notes above a drawl. "The notices will be just as bad. They have to be."

"Katy, you're swell not to say, 'I told you so,' but I can't afford to be a prima donna. A press agent can't turn down a play because it smells."

"You didn't have to sink your own money in it," Katy said.

"It was a gamble and we lost. So what the hell! It was only five C's."

"Your last five," Katy said. "And five hundred dollars would get us both back to California." She paused as she eyed his lemon-yellow sports shirt and the Nile-green tie. "Where you belong," she added.

Dave buttoned his horse-blanket leisure jacket, completing the portrait of Hollywood. "Anything I can get for you, Katy?"

"Yes. A plane reservation for California. One seat."

"But, Katy, you know I haven't the dough."

"I have," Katy said. "It means digging into my divorce money again, but at least I'll be able to get away from you and this vulture's nest."

"There are vultures in California, too, Katy. You know that."

"They're my kind of vultures. I can cope with them. Besides, the climate's better." Katy put down her cup, got

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My title for Lawrence G. Blochman's story in the September issue of EQMM is:

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out of bed, and came over to him. "I'm sorry, kid," she said. "You're a big dope, Dave. I guess you always will be, and I'll probably always love you anyhow. But we just can't hit it off together. I wish we could. Heaven knows, I've tried. I suppose you have too, in your funny way, but it's no use. Goodbye again, Dave. Have fun with the vultures."

"Goodbye, Katy." Dave put his arms around her. She was almost as tall as he was, but not as wide. She had been fashioned — and well-fashioned — with bold, sweeping strokes, yet there was a finesse about her generous features. Dave kissed her, but her lips were hard and cold against his. They always were when Katy had made up her mind. She had made up her mind three times before, and each time they had managed to patch things up, but there was an air of finality about this time. He felt very empty inside.

"Look, Dave," Katy said, "before you start curing your hangover and telling your troubles to a bartender, you'd better run over and tell Isabel that you couldn't reach Tom."

Dave recognized Isabel Connell the moment the taxi pulled up in front of the cigar store. The small, gray-eyed blonde in the natty blue uniform of an airline stewardess had to be Isabel. Nobody else in sight was trying so hard to be outwardly calm but was obviously dying a slow and painful death of anxiety. Her trim feet made a small, nervous pattern as she turned from side to side, scanning every face.

Dave told the cab driver to wait and crossed the sidewalk.

"May I help, Isabel?" he said.

The girl turned to him and her eyes widened. Perhaps she was merely startled by the flamboyant attire of the hatless stranger.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"I'm the wrong number," Dave said. "I've come to tell you not to wait any longer. Tom's not home."

"But he *must* be home! He's expecting me before five. Is it five?"

"Quarter of," Dave replied. "Tom didn't answer his phone."

"Maybe it's out of order. I don't suppose I could ask you to —" She stopped. Her eyes were suddenly hard, suspicious. "Just what wrong number are you?" she demanded.

"I'm Broadway 7-4476. I'm the foul-tempered Dave Ward." Dave grinned. "And you were going to ask me if I'd give you a lift to Tom's place. The answer is 'yes'."

"I'm sorry." The girl smiled. It was a pleasant, trusting smile that disclosed small, even, white teeth. "I'm being silly and jittery since my bag was stolen, I guess. And rude. I accept with thanks."

Isabel gave a West Eighty-third Street address. The driver worked his way uptown to the Seventy-ninth Street crossing. Twice she asked Dave the time because, she explained, she kept her own watch on Greenwich Mean Time while serving on the trans-Atlantic run.

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They stopped in front of a dingy row of brownstone houses just off Columbus Avenue.

"I can't begin to thank you," the girl said.

"Don't — yet. What if Tom really isn't home? And you without a dime." Dave paid off the cab.

"You're nice," Isabel said. She rang the last of a row of bells. There was no name under the button.

When there was no answering buzz after a minute, Dave tried the street door. It was unlatched.

"We'll go up and leave a note for Tom," Dave said.

Isabel brushed past him without a word. Dave followed her up the rickety steps which creaked and trembled under his tread. He tried not to touch the grimy handrail or the walls which were covered with the smudges of many hands and the scrawls of many children. On the second landing a door opened and a woman in a frowsy gingham dress poked her gray head out, then withdrew it quickly. The stairway smelled of boiled cabbage.

At the head of the stairs Isabel knocked on a door and called, "Tom!" The door gave beneath her knuckles and stood a few inches ajar. She stepped inside. Dave followed.

"Tom!"

The small apartment was furnished in a manner which did not match the building. There was a good red rug on the floor, the lamps were expensive, and the chairs well upholstered in good taste. Cretonne drapes billowed into the room with the hot evening breeze. A tearful nasal tenor blared from a radio across the court.

"Tom!"

Isabel crossed the room, threw open another door, advanced into a tiny kitchenette. As soon as her feet left the rug and touched the gray linoleum of the kitchenette, Dave's stomach contracted into a tight, cold, complex knot.

"Isabel! Your feet!"

The girl looked down. Slowly she raised her eyes to Dave's. She seemed to wilt like a flower in a blast of hot wind.

Her small, pointed footprints were stamped in crimson on the linoleum.

Dave was suddenly aware that the rug under his own feet was wet. He turned his head and saw a trail of crimson splashes leading beyond the edge of the rug. He followed the crimson trail to the bathroom.

A man was kneeling in front of the washstand, his head bent over the basin. The basin was half full of blood.

The haft of a knife protruded from the juncture of his neck and left shoulder.

The tight cold knot which was Dave Ward's stomach suddenly expanded into writhing icy loops, then again contracted into a snarl which grew tighter and tighter until it was a small, sharp point of cold nausea. The image of the man kneeling before the washbowl became blurred and distorted. When his eyes focused again, Dave noticed that the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet stood open

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above the man's head and that the man was clutching a bottle of aspirin tablets in one inert hand.

Dave blinked and looked again. The label on the bottle was unmistakable. Why would a man who had been knifed stagger into the bathroom in search of aspirin? Ridiculous, Dave decided as he backed through the door and collided with Isabel Connell.

Isabel, obviously, had seen the man kneeling at the washstand. Her face was gray. She turned without a word, walked into the drawing room, and dropped limply into an overstuffed chair. She stared silently at Dave.

"Let's get out of here," Dave said.

The girl's small, upturned nose seemed to quiver slightly. She gave no other sign of emotion but in his eyes she had changed. She was no longer a pretty little airline hostess bewildered because her bag had been stolen. She was now a cynical blonde adventuress. She was sinister. The whole apartment was sinister, with its red rug sticky with blood and the window curtains waving in the hot breeze like signaling arms, urging Dave to get out — and get out fast.

"You go," the girl said at last. "I've got to stay. And don't look at me with those accusing eyes. This was your own idea, you know."

Dave nodded. "Is that Tom in the bathroom?"

"It *was* Tom. He's dead."

"You seem very positive."

"I am. I've seen enough of them to know."

"You mean —?" Dave swallowed. "Do you always find knives sticking in your friends when you drop in?"

"I mean I used to be an Army nurse. I know when they're dead."

"You're very calm about it."

"I'm not. I'm all cold and crawly inside. I always am, but I've learned not to show it."

"Not even when it's your boy friend?"

Isabel's well-plucked eyebrows arched scornfully. "Tom wasn't my boy friend. I'd only seen him twice in my life."

"But you *do* know Tom's last name?"

"Grover. Tom Grover."

"I'm not usually nosey, Isabel," Dave said, "but if the cops or anybody else should walk in here right now, I'd have a hard time making them believe the completely improbable story of how I got here. Can't you give me a little background on our friend in the bathroom?"

"I don't know any more about him than you do," said Isabel, her lips trembling.

Dave smiled incredulously. "You sounded pretty frantic on the phone when you got my wrong number. Terribly important, you said. Why?"

"All I know," said Isabel slowly, "is that my fiancé gave me an envelope this morning and said it was terribly important that I get it to Tom Grover by 5 this afternoon."

"Is your fiancé a knife-thrower at Coney Island?"

The girl gave him a withering look. "Jefferson Teller is an airline mete-

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orologist at Gander," she said. Then she added, "Gander is in Newfoundland. I thought I'd tell you before you started making jokes about sauce for the goose. I met Jeff when we were both in the service. He was an air force meteorologist. When he took a civilian job at Gander, I signed with Seven Seas Airlines for the trans-Atlantic run. I get to see him at Gander at least once a week. We're going to be married soon."

"Congratulations," Dave said. "What was in the letter that made somebody stick a knife in Tom Grover before he could even read it?"

"I don't know. Really. Jeff didn't tell me. All he said, just before I took off from Gander this morning, was that I should deliver it to Tom by five today and that it was awfully important. I didn't open it."

"Don't you think, Isabel, that under the circumstances, we might take a peek at the text?"

"I haven't got the letter," Isabel said. "It was in my bag — the one that man snatched just before I phoned you — by mistake."

"What man?"

"I didn't see his face. I just saw his back as he disappeared in the crowd on First Avenue, but —"

The telephone rang.

Dave Ward jumped. Then to prove to himself that he wasn't really nervous, he lit a cigarette. But he wished desperately he was in Sardi's bar with a double bourbon in front of him. Or even at home fighting with Katy. Or any place except West Eighty-third Street with a corpse, a blonde airline stewardess, and a telephone ringing.

"Why not answer?" Isabel said. "You might find out something about Tom."

Dave picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Tom," said a man's voice. "The girl come yet?"

"She came," Dave replied.

"Good," said the voice. "What next?"

Dave hesitated. He was trying to place the man's accent. He said, "I haven't decided yet."

"Any news on the big fish?" the voice asked.

"Not a word," Dave said.

"He's left the other side," the voice continued. "That's definite. He ought to arrive tonight or tomorrow."

"Arrive where?" Dave asked — and immediately realized he had made a mistake.

There was a brief, eloquent silence. Then, icily, the voice asked, "Who is speaking, please?"

"This is Tom," Dave said. "Tom Grover."

There was a short, cold, unbelieving laugh — then the click of a broken connection.

Dave noted that the hand which held the instrument was sweating profusely. He wiped the bakelite on his coat sleeve and replaced the receiver. He wiped his palms on his hips. He mopped his brow. He said, "It didn't work."

"Who was it?"

"A man with a slight accent. Ger-

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man, I think. When he said 'fish' he held on to the *sh* sound like this: fish-sh-sh."

"Why in the world was he talking about fish?"

"He said the big fish should arrive tonight or tomorrow," Dave said. "Who's the big fish?"

"I wouldn't know." Isabel shook her head — believably, Dave thought. She stood up. "Maybe we'd better go after all."

Somewhere in the apartment a buzzer whined an insistent demand for the street door to be opened.

"We're too late," Dave said.

"We don't have to answer, do we?"

"So what? The street door's unlatched. Remember?"

The buzzer emitted a shrill series of short, angry notes.

"There's one more flight of stairs up," Dave said. "Shall we try the roof?"

A long impatient buzz punctuated his question.

They tried. The steps creaked as they climbed the short flight toward the skylight.

The door to the roof was locked.

The buzzer inside the apartment was silent now. Footsteps were already stomping up the stairway, three flights below.

Isabel looked at Dave. There was no longer a sinister gleam in her blue eyes. Her face was a map of hopeless despair. She inched closer to him as they listened to the footsteps — slow, deliberate, evenly paced, as relentless as Time. The steps grew louder, more measured, more purposeful, as they tramped out the groaning complaints of the worn treads. After a brief tattoo across the last landing, they stopped in front of Tom Grover's door. Dave's pounding heart seemed to stop, too.

They heard three light knocks, then there was silence. Dave felt Isabel's fingers tighten on his arm. He could not see the door from the top step. That meant the man at the door could not see them either.

Dave could hear a faint jingle of keys, then the snap of a lock. The door opened and closed. Dave's heart started beating again. He breathed deeply.

"Look," he whispered. "We'll leave separately. You go first — and quick. No, wait!" He took out his wallet and extricated the five-dollar bill he had earmarked for orchids for Katy. "Good luck," he said.

The girl squeezed his hand as she took the bill. Her light step faded into the dingy stair well. After an eternity he heard the street door close.

Dave started down, remembering that the two stairs just above Tom Grover's landing creaked badly. He took a long stride to avoid them, twisted his ankle, and stumbled. He executed two intricate ballet steps before he caromed off the wall into Tom Grover's door with a resounding bang. He had just recovered his balance when the door was pulled open.

"Well?" demanded a tall, rather

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thin man with close-cropped sandy hair that was graying at the temples. His eyes were a cold, pale blue, as impersonal as glass eyes. "Well?" he repeated through invisible lips.

"Are you Mr. Grover?" Dave managed to say.

"This is Grover's apartment. What do you want?"

"I . . . well, I live downstairs," Dave said. "A young lady came here a while ago looking for Mr. Grover. She said she couldn't wait, but that if I heard Mr. Grover come in I should tell him to get in touch with her right away. She said he'd know —"

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all."

"Thank you." The man with the glassy blue eyes slammed the door.

Dave started down the stairs two at a time. Halfway down, he realized that the man with the glassy eyes spoke with a slight Teutonic intonation. He went down the last steps three at a time.

When he reached the sidewalk, he inhaled the smell of hot asphalt as if it were the sweet breath of freedom. Then he saw a bar at the corner and started walking rapidly toward it.

As he gulped his double bourbon, he wondered if he should call the police. He was still wondering when he heard the sirens. He paid his check and went to the door.

Four prowl cars had converged on Eighty-third Street, their sirens screaming at a bottleneck created by a taxi, a mail van, and a newspaper truck. Another police car wedged itself slowly into the impasse and three plainclothesmen got out directly in front of Dave. Dave spun on his heel and started back into the bar — too late. One of the detectives shouted at him: "Harya, Ward!"

Dave turned back slowly and replied to the greeting without enthusiasm. He was not at all pleased to see Kenneth Kilkenny, even though he had not seen him in three years — before Kilkenny had been transferred from the Broadway detail to Homicide.

"What are you doing so far from Broadway, Ward?" the detective asked jovially. Kilkenny was never grim about his job. Homicide, after all, was just his daily routine.

"I got lost in the subway," Dave said. "Seen any good murders lately, Kenny?"

"Nothing but," said Kilkenny, taking Dave's arm and starting to cross the street. "I'm on my way to one now."

"Anyone I know?" Dave asked, trying to hold back.

"Can't say. A telephone tip. Anonymous. A stiff in the bathroom of the third floor rear. You still work for the Shuberts?"

"I was working for Ben Smock until today. I'd get some ducats only I think the show's going to fold in a day or two."

Dave wondered if his voice sounded casual enough. He didn't feel at all casual. But Detective Kilkenny was

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in a talkative, reminiscent mood and would probably cling to his arm as long as there was a prospect of free theatre tickets.

"Whatever happened to that redhead that used to work for Billy Primrose?" the detective asked. "He used to get me all kinds of passes."

"You mean Bassett?" Dave asked. "He's out in Hollywood making himself a pile of dough."

"You've been in Hollywood yourself, I guess," said Kilkenny, glancing at Dave's yellow shirt and green tie.

"I did a two-year stretch out there," Dave said. "My wife's nuts about the Coast but I get awfully homesick for the smell of hamburgers in the Times Square subway station."

"Must be a screwy place, Hollywood," Kilkenny said. "Well, I better get along upstairs before the harness bulls tramp down all the clues. See you in jail, Ward."

Dave hurried to the corner of Columbus, hailed a cab and gave the address of his apartment.

When Dave got home, his wife was putting on a big blue hat. This was obviously an occasion of some kind, for Katy Ward rarely wore a hat. She tinkled faintly as she adjusted the brim. Katy had designed costume jewelry before she married Dave, and she always wore a pound or two of her pet creations. The bracelets and bangles, although they showed a strong Navajo influence, jingled like Oriental wind-bells with every gesture.

"Hello, Dave," Katy said. "Did you make my reservation for California?"

"Well, no," Dave apologized. "Something came up."

"I thought it would," Katy said. "That wrong number of yours phoned again."

"Wrong number?" Dave tried to look innocent.

"Isabel Something. Seems you gave her five dollars. Isn't that a little high?"

"Now look, Katy —"

"Anyhow, she wanted to bring it back. I told her to wait a day or two and she could have you all to herself."

"Look, Katy. Isabel is madly in love with a meteorologist in Newfoundland. She's not interested in me."

"Isabel is very much interested in you. She simply has to see you right away. So I'll go out and leave you two little lovebirds alone. Not that I care, but what were you and Isabel up to this afternoon?"

"We went to a murder," Dave said.

"Murder?" Katy sat down so abruptly that her bracelets gave off an exclamatory clang.

"Since I couldn't raise Tom on the phone, I escorted Isabel to his place. He was dead."

"You poor gallant dope!" Katy shook her head. Her long earrings oscillated but they didn't jangle. "Dave, if you've got yourself into another mess, you're on your own.

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I'm not going to dig into my divorce money again to rescue you. The first time I had enough put away to pay a lawyer, you got yourself jugged for herding camels through the lobby of the Waldorf. That was the night of the premiere of *Oasis Love* and I had to pay your fine or let you languish in the hoosegow. Next time I was all set to buy my freedom I had to ransom you from that troupe of thirty-five midgets you hired to picket the opening of *Their Troubles Were Little Ones.*"

"That wasn't my fault, Katy. The theatre welched on me."

"Don't prompt me. I remember. The manager crawled out from under because the stagehands' union protested against publicity which ridiculed legitimate labor practices. But the midgets *were* arrested for obstructing traffic, and you *were* legally responsible since you hired them, and they *were* going to sue you . . ."

The doorbell rang.

"That must be Isabel," Katy said.

"How did she get our address?" Dave asked.

"I gave it to her. I was curious to see what she looked like. Let her in, Dave."

Dave complied.

"Isabel, this is my wife. Miss Connell, Mrs. Ward."

"How do you do?" said Isabel, breathlessly. "Your husband has been terribly kind to me, Mrs. Ward. Do you mind if I ask one more favor of him?"

"No soap," said Dave quickly. "No more favors and no more murders."

"You look like the wrath of God, Miss Connell," Katy said. "Sit down. You're as white as a ghost. What's wrong now?"

"I've been followed," Isabel replied.

"Followed?" Dave stiffened. "Here?"

"I think I shook him before I got this far, but when I came out of that house on Eighty-third Street there was a man standing at the curb, watching me. He was a plump little man, quite dark, with a funny beaked nose like a — like some bird."

"Like a vulture," Katy prompted. "Dave always attracts vultures."

"I didn't notice he was following me," Isabel continued, "until I got out of my taxi at the East Side air terminal. Then I saw the man getting out of a cab right behind me. He followed me inside and tried to talk to me. I hurried into the Seven Seas personnel office, and I think I lost him then. Meanwhile I traded places with one of the stewardesses on the midnight flight to London. It's against regulations but the girl is a friend of mine. That way I can see Jeff Teller at Gander in the morning. I think Jeff ought to know that I couldn't deliver his letter to Tom Grover because Tom was dead."

"What's that got to do with me?" Dave demanded.

"Well . . ." Isabel drew a folded envelope from the bosom of her blouse. "I thought I'd take the letter

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back to Jeff, but I changed my mind since that man started following me. I'm afraid."

"You told me that the letter was stolen with your bag," said Dave grimly.

"Did I say that?" Isabel gave him a stare of wide-eyed innocence. "Well, it wasn't true. I took it out of my bag before it was snatched. I don't know why I misled you. I guess I didn't quite trust you."

"You lied to me," Dave said.

"Nonsense," said Katy. "Dave never did understand women. She wasn't lying. She was just being careful. After all, she didn't know you except as a wrong number with a hangover. A woman can't be too careful with strangers nowadays. What did you want Dave to do for you, Isabel?"

"I thought he might keep the letter for me until I got back from Gander. That way it would be safe from these men who've been trying to steal it. And it must be something important."

"Nothing doing," Dave protested. "You take that letter to the police."

"But they'll keep me and question me and I won't be able to get off for Gander tonight. Don't you see I've *got* to warn Jeff about what happened! He might be in danger."

"Let's see the letter," Dave said. He ripped open the envelope, scanned the text quickly, then reread it. He frowned. The letter was handwritten in apparent haste and was undated. It read:

Dear Baron: I now have confirmation that our cocky trouble-maker has active friends on the outside and that they are making some progress. I'm taking steps to stop them and to isolate the pest further. However, I think it is imperative that we speed up moving the goods from Bad Grienenheim. I will use special as well as regular channels to get them Stateside as quickly as possible. Please give the bearer the usual gross.

There was no signature except a scrawled initial that looked to Dave like an *S*.

"I don't see anything murderous in this," Dave said, as he handed the letter to Isabel, "unless — Who's the Baron?"

"I haven't the faintest — wait a minute. I wonder if he could be the passenger on my plane this morning? He was inventing excuses to talk to me all the way down from Gander. He pretended his seat belt wouldn't fasten. Or he'd come back and ask for coffee. At Idlewild he offered me a ride into town — which I refused. I saw him again at the terminal and he tipped his hat to me. I wonder if he wasn't the man who followed me when I went to phone. He could have snatched my bag. His name was . . . let's see . . . Carl Schultig, Amsterdam to New York."

"Schultig," Dave repeated. "Did he have a German accent?"

"A slight accent, yes! He was tall and thin. His hair was getting gray and it was cut very short."

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"Did he have pale blue eyes? Sort of glassy eyes?"

"Yes, he had strange blue eyes. And his lips were very thin, so thin that they disappeared when he smiled."

"Whether or not Mr. Schultig is the Baron, he undoubtedly is the gentleman who called on Tom Grover while we were having jitters on the skylight stairway," Dave said. "I forgot to tell you that I saw him after you left, and that he also saw me. My first impression was unpleasant." Dave retrieved the letter, went to a spindly writing desk for a fresh envelope, and resealed the missive. "I think definitely you ought to turn this over to the police," he said.

"No, please. If I do that, they'll never let me get off to Gander tonight. And I must see Jeff." Isabel's blue eyes pleaded desperately.

"Why don't we do it this way, dear?" Katy Ward volunteered. "Let Dave give the letter to the police, but not until midnight, so they won't stop you from flying to Gander. Usually if there are ten ways of doing a thing and nine of them are right, Dave will pick the wrong way. But this seems to be a rather simple operation and I think we can rely on Dave." She turned to Isabel. "Are you going to the airport now, dear?"

"I'm going to the terminal to pick up ground transportation."

"Then I'll go along," Katy said. "I'll make my reservation for California. Good night, Dave darling. And remember you're not to give that letter to New York's finest before midnight."

For a long time after the door had closed, Dave held the letter in his hand, staring at it, his lips forming soundless comment upon women and the situation into which they had thrust him. It was his idea, of course, to turn the letter over to the police, but he had intended that Isabel should do that little chore. After all, it was her murder, and he had no desire to get involved any deeper. He wondered what story he should tell Kilkenny — for, of course, he would see Kilkenny rather than some coldly skeptical homicide dick. Should he tell Kilkenny the straight story? If so, how would he explain his failure to tell the detective that he had been the first to find Tom Grover's body? Well, a man shouldn't make important decisions on an empty stomach, he concluded. So he stuffed the letter into his pocket and went out in search of food.

It was nearly dark when he reached the street. The garish light of neon signs which blazed a path through the hot dusk to Broadway half a block distant gave strange masks to the crowds on the sidewalk. It seemed to Dave that every other man he passed was plump and dark with a beaked nose — like a vulture. And too many of the others seemed tall and thin with close-cropped hair and no lips.

Dave bought some newspapers and ducked into an air-conditioned restaurant. He ate slowly. He had several

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hours to kill, and the whole evening press and the bulldog editions of the morning papers to review.

The bulldog editions had a few inconspicuous stickfuls on the Grover murder. The reporting was routine for the most part, and told Dave little he did not already know. The last few lines of one story, however, intrigued him. He read:

> From papers found in the apartment, police identified the dead man as Capt. Thomas L. Grover, U. S. Army. (The Associated Press reported from Washington that Defense Department records showed Capt. Grover had returned from overseas duty two weeks ago, that he was on terminal leave, due to return to civilian life in a few days, and that he was unmarried.)
>
> Manhattan detectives from Homicide West are seeking a man who telephoned the anonymous tip on the murder, apparently from the dead man's apartment, and who disappeared before the arrival of the police.

So Tom Grover was an army officer just back from overseas? Isabel Connell had been an army nurse overseas. And Jefferson Teller, her fiancé, had been an air force meteorologist — overseas. The facts began to add up, and the probable total was not pleasing. Was he being sucked into quicksand? Was the blue-eyed Isabel really as innocent and unknowing as she seemed? Or was she part of a plot that had ended in Grover's murder? The letter was suddenly very heavy in his pocket . . .

As he left the air-conditioned restaurant, the night hit him in the face like a hot towel. He hurried up the street and was slowly hoisted to his apartment by a reluctant automatic elevator.

When he stepped into the foyer of his apartment, he was surprised to find the light on. He remembered having put it out before he left. His wife must have come home.

"Hi, Katy," he said.

There was no answer. He paused an instant, sniffing the fragrance of cigar smoke, then walked quickly into the living-dining-bedroom. As he crossed the threshold, a man arose from the only easy chair.

The man wore the uniform of an American army officer. The silver leaves of a lieutenant-colonel gleamed on his broad shoulders. The lieutenant-colonel was comfortably built. He was about 40, clean shaven, with an incipient double chin and a well-fed, self-satisfied face built to order for a Havana cigar.

"I hope you'll pardon my badgering your superintendent into letting me in, Mr. Ward," said the lieutenant-colonel. "I thought it best to wait for you privately. My business is quite confidential."

"I don't think I know you," Dave said. "Did you tell the super that I did?"

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"I showed my credentials. I'm Lieutenant-Colonel Bertram T. Leatherby. C.I.D."

"C.I.D.?"

"Criminal Investigation Department. American forces in Germany. I just flew in to confer with Captain Grover. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Nothing." Dave reached into his coat pocket for a cigarette. He fumbled for what seemed like ages before he found the package. His fingers insisted on getting involved with the letter Isabel Connell had not delivered to Captain Tom Grover.

"You're dripping wet," said Colonel Leatherby. "Why don't you take off your coat?"

"I like New York summers," Dave replied. "I thrive on the heat."

Leatherby exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke and squinted narrowly at Dave through the blue haze. "When did you last see Captain Grover?" he asked casually.

"Grover? I've never seen him."

"You mean, I suppose, that you've never seen him alive. You know, of course, that Captain Grover was murdered today shortly before my return to this country."

Dave finally lit his cigarette. He was pleased to note that his hand was steady. He asked, "Why would I know that?"

Colonel Leatherby drew deeply on his cigar. "Because," he said, in words of smoke, "you seem to know a charming young lady named Isabel Connell."

Dave blinked. "If you've been talking to Miss Connell," he said, "you must know that our meeting was purely accidental and that our acquaintance is only hours old."

Leatherby removed the diminishing butt from his lips and examined the teeth marks. He did not look at Dave as he said, "Miss Connell is not very talkative. In fact, I think she's holding back something."

"Something like what?" Dave asked.

"Something like a letter." Colonel Leatherby gave up examining his cigar butt and replaced it in his mouth so carefully that his teeth must have fitted into the old marks. He looked squarely at Dave as he added, "A letter that was to have been delivered to Captain Grover."

Dave thrust his hands into his coat pockets. He toyed with the idea of giving the letter to Leatherby and washing his hands of the whole business. He did nothing of the kind, however, and it was not merely because of his promise to give Isabel a head start on her flight to Gander. He didn't like the officer's approach or his manner. There was something about the cigar-smoking colonel that raised his hackles and his guard.

"What's the letter all about?" he asked.

"I don't know. That's why I've come to see you, Mr. Ward. Did Miss Connell give you the letter?"

"Why should she? I told you I met Miss Connell today by sheer accident. If this letter is as important as you

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seem to think, would she turn it over to a perfect stranger?"

"She might," Leatherby said, "if the letter happened to be incriminating — or dangerous. A pretty girl might very well use her charms to have an incriminating or dangerous document found on almost anybody — except herself."

"Not on me." Dave kept his hands in his pockets. "Why don't you let the New York police find the letter for you?"

"They're working on only one angle of the case: Who killed Captain Grover? They're not interested in the angles which concern the army. I am. That's why I flew back from Germany."

"What are the angles, Colonel? Or is that a military secret?"

Leatherby sadly extinguished the last inch of his cigar. "The details are secret," he said, "but I can tell you this much, Ward. You're mixed up in a very serious smuggling operation."

Dave tried to remember the phrases of the letter. The "goods" to be speedily moved from Bad Grienenheim could well be smuggled goods.

"I'm not mixed up in anything," he said.

"Perhaps not yesterday, Ward, but you are today, through your relationship with Miss Connell. Isabel Connell has a boy friend who works for Seven Seas Airlines at Gander. His name is Jeff Teller, and he has a brother, Bill Teller, who was a G.I. in my command in Germany. Still is, technically, although he was arrested a month ago and is awaiting court-martial. The Teller boys were obviously the trans-Atlantic link in this smuggling setup. It begins to look as if Captain Grover had something to do with the New York end of the deal, and my job is to find out what."

"You seem to be doing pretty well," Dave said. He meant it. How had Leatherby found out his name and address? From Isabel? From the plump, dark man with the nose like a vulture's beak? From the Baron? Or the passenger from Amsterdam named Carl Schultig? It was all very confusing.

"Of course I'll be glad to help in any way I can," Dave went on. "If anything further comes up, where can I reach you?"

"I'm at the Exeter Towers," Leatherby said, "but don't ask for me at the desk. They have instructions to say I'm not registered. My room is 313."

"I hope I won't have to contact you."

"You probably will. But keep your skirts clean, Ward. They're a tough gang."

"I know," Dave said. "They kill people. Good night, Colonel."

Dave listened to the tired hum of the elevator going down. Then he poured a drink, and debated with himself whether or not he should forget his promise to Katy and Isabel and get in touch with Detective Kilkenny immediately.

He had just lifted the phone and

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dialed two digits when Katy came in. He hung up at once, but apparently his wife detected a sheepishness in his expression.

"What are you up to now?" Katy asked. "Why the guilty grin? Have you been smoking corn silk behind the barn?"

"I've been a very good boy," Dave said. "I had company, so I wore my company manners. Any luck with the airlines?"

"Perfect. I leave day after tomorrow."

"I'll miss you like hell, Katy. Maybe you'll change your mind."

"Not if I don't want to lose it entirely," Katy said. "Who was your company?"

"Very important. Army brass. A lieutenant-colonel with very fine sources of information. He knew I was acquainted with Isabel Connell. Did Isabel talk to any army officers after she left here with you?"

"Not while we were together. I left her at the air terminal. I don't know what she did after that. What did the colonel want?"

"The letter," Dave said.

"The army works fast," Katy said. "Did the army get the letter?"

"The army did not."

"Good. Because I've decided that Isabel isn't such a wrong number after all. I think she's on the level."

"I'm not so sure," Dave said.

"I am. I like her. I'm glad I'm leaving you in good hands. I hope you two can keep out of jail. And speaking of jail, I forgot to tell you that Ben Smock phoned you this afternoon. He wants to see you."

"Okay. I'll run over to the theatre and get the bad news. And maybe my last salary check."

"Just a minute." With a jingle of bracelets Katy executed a neat end run and blocked the doorway. She held out her hand. "The letter," she said.

"But I thought it was understood —"

"It was," Katy said. "Midnight. But it's only 10 o'clock now, and I know how you love to take shortcuts. If you leave the letter here I'll feel better about the chances of your running into that man with the vulture beak — or one of your detective friends. I've got to protect you and Isabel. Give."

Dave gave.

The producer of *The Affairs of Gwendolyn* greeted Dave like a long-patient creditor who has just learned his man has won the Irish sweepstakes.

"Where have you been all day?" Ben Smock exclaimed. "I'm frantic."

"Looking for another job," Dave said. "I read the notices."

"Another job, my right eye!" said Mr. Smock. "The notices were wonderful. Almost as bad as for *Abie's Irish Rose*, and that ran five years. Or was it ten? Listen to them laughing in there?"

The chorus of merriment rising from the auditorium of the Lorimer Theatre was clearly audible through

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the closed door of Mr. Smock's office off the mezzanine.

"What are they laughing at?" Dave asked. "The play stinks."

"Sure it stinks," the producer agreed. "So they love it. When the critics hate anything like they hated *The Affairs of Gwendolyn*, the second-night audience is sure to eat it up. So Dave, I want you should fix up a whole new series of newspaper ads and work in all the nasty cracks the best critics made. You know. Something clever and comical. When can I have the copy, Dave?"

"Tomorrow," Dave said. "If I'm not in jail."

Another roar of laughter swept up from the darkened theatre as Dave left the producer's office.

It was nearly midnight when he telephoned Homicide West from a drug store and asked for Kilkenny. The detective, he was informed, was out on a case.

Dave intended calling again when he got home, but Katy was asleep, and he didn't want to wake her. He undressed and went to bed in the dark.

He fell into a deep, disturbed sleep. All his recurring anxiety dreams crowded in upon him in one wild phantasmagoria which continued timelessly to torture him until the images disappeared and the sound dissolved into a series of buzzings and thumpings. When Dave at last realized he was awake, listening to a simultaneous pounding on the door and a ringing of the buzzer, he sprang from bed and groped for the light.

"All right, all right, don't break the door down!" he muttered.

The light disclosed that Katy was already at the door. When she opened it, Detective Kenneth Kilkenny came in.

"You sure sleep sound, Ward, for a guy with a load on his conscience," Kilkenny said. Then he saw Katy, and apologized — without taking off the dark slouch hat which hid his eyes. "Sorry to come barging in like this, Mrs. Ward, but I got to talk to your husband. Get some clothes on, Ward."

"You can talk right here, officer," Katy said. "I want to know the worst. Has Dave set fire to an orphan asylum — for publicity?"

Kilkenny only grunted.

"What time is it, Kenny?" Dave asked, yawning.

"Three o'clock." The detective sat down on the only easy chair and finally took off his hat. He didn't look much like the conventional police detective without his hat. He was nearly bald, he was short and slight of build, and he had a timid, scholarly appearance. But Dave knew he was tough. And he knew what was coming.

"Why didn't you tell me you just came from Grover's place when I saw you in Eighty-third Street?" Kilkenny demanded.

"I wanted to test your powers of observation and deduction," Dave said. He felt a little foolish walking on the cuffs of his pajama trousers.

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He pulled up his pants and sat on the edge of the bed. "I knew you'd find out everything anyhow, Kenny, and besides there was nothing I could tell you that would help."

"You could have helped me put my hands on that dame you went up there with. Name of Connell?"

"Isabel Connell. See? You know everything, Kenny."

"Except where to find Isabel. Where is she, Ward?"

"At this moment," Dave said, "she's probably somewhere between here and Newfoundland. She went out on a midnight flight to London."

"Guess again," the detective said.

"That's straight, Kenny," Dave insisted. "She wasn't scheduled to go out tonight, but she changed places with the regular stewardess because she had a date with her boy friend at Gander."

"I know," Kilkenny said. "But Seven Seas' midnight flight didn't get off the ground until 12:45 because Miss Connell didn't show up. They had to rustle up the regular gal to take her place."

"I'll be damned!" Dave said. "Then where's Isabel?"

"That," said Kilkenny, "is what I came here to find out."

Dave got up from the bed and crossed the room to the chair on which he had hung his coat.

"I'll be damned!" he repeated, as he looked through his pockets for a cigarette.

"What about the disappearing stewardess?" Kilkenny asked.

Dave struck a match on the mirror of the dresser. He said, "Look, Kenny, I'm going to tell you the whole story. It's pretty screwy, which is why I didn't spring it on you in Eighty-third Street. But it's true. I never saw Isabel Connell until today. I guess it's yesterday now. She came into my life as a wrong number."

"Skip the riddles," Kilkenny said.

"She was trying to call Tom Grover and she got my number by mistake."

Kilkenny consulted a dog-eared notebook, then walked to the phone. He glanced at the disc in the center of the dial. "I'll buy that," he said. "Then what?"

Dave spoke rapidly, relieved at having cleared the first hurdle safely. He repeated the girl's story of the stolen bag, told of trying to phone Grover.

"What time was that?" the detective asked.

"About four," Dave said.

"Three minutes past four," Katy amended.

"Go on, Ward."

Dave told about picking up the stranded Isabel and escorting her to Grover's apartment. He detailed the discovery of the body, the phone call, and the arrival of the man who fitted the description of Carl Schultig, air passenger from Amsterdam, who had shown such an interest in Isabel during the Gander-New York leg of the flight.

"When did she tell you about this bird Schultig?" Kilkenny inter-

(*continued on page 120*)

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MICHAEL GILBERT**

TITLE: ***Under the Last Scuttleful***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: Marlhammer, England

TIME: Not long ago

COMMENTS: *Sam Cotton could not get used to the cellar of the Old Rectory. He was sure something evil lay in the far corner.*

"AND DON'T FORGET THE BOILER," said Mrs. Cotton. "I opened it up so that we can have a nice bath. It'll need two scuttles of coke."

Sam Cotton groaned.

When they had moved into the Old Rectory at Marlhammer he had felt, in his bones, that he was making his last move. He was only 49. But the time comes in every man's life when he will settle down to enjoy the fruits of his toil.

Starting as an unskilled, untrained, almost unpaid assistant to an assistant in a shaky firm of chartered accountants, he had worked. How he had worked! Twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day. In his spare time, at night, during weekends. Now he was a qualified accountant, a partner, a director of four companies, and a very rich man indeed.

Too fat, not healthy, seldom happy — but rich.

The Old Rectory had cost money. It was a plain, Georgian house, of dark red brick and darker red tile with more solid wood in its window frames and box shutters than a builder would put into a whole row of houses these days. It stood back from the road, a little isolated by beech trees. It had its private path to the little church, but it was nearly a quarter of a mile from its nearest human neighbor.

"It's pretty," agreed Mrs. Cotton, "but it's got too many rooms."

This, like most of Bertha Cotton's deceptively simple remarks, was true. The house had been designed for and occupied by old-fashioned country parsons. It had many bedrooms and vast boxrooms. It had a pantry, which

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the Cottons used as a kitchen; a kitchen, which they used as a store room; and numerous closets and sheds and cellars.

"I wonder how the Grundsells managed?" said Mrs. Cotton.

She referred to their immediate predecessors, who had purchased the house from the last incumbent some five years previously.

Mr. Grundsell had been a small, happy, cheerful person, popular in the Village. Not nearly as rich as Sam Cotton but perhaps happier. His wife, older than him by some years, had been something of a mystery at first. A heavy, dark, foreign-looking woman, who seldom spoke. However, nothing is hidden for long from the legion of charwomen and daily helps, and it became known — whisper it softly — that she drank. Seldom, but my, how deeply!

"A cupboard full of bottles," reported Mrs. Tizer. "Gin. And another pile — so big — buried in the paddock."

However, Mrs. Grundsell had not lasted. Perhaps she found the house too isolated. She spoke wistfully of Blackpool. Mr. Grundsell, who gave in to her on everything, gave in to her on this. One night of dark and storm, when no one was about, he packed her and her belongings into their big, closed car and drove off. Or so he reported, when he mentioned it later. Marlhammer saw her no more.

Shortly afterwards, Grundsell decided to sell.

"Not surprised, really," said Mrs. Tizer. "A great big house, and him all alone in it."

That was how the Cottons had come to buy it. A handsome house, full of large, cheerful rooms, rooms still redolent of the line of sober, God-fearing clerics who had inhabited them along with their industrious wives, their contingents of servants, and their quiversful of children. (Against the edge of one bedroom door Sam Cotton had found their heights recorded, starting with Benjamin, a mere 2′ 9″ off the ground and running up, through eight others, to Ruth.)

A cheerful house, with one reservation.

Sam could not get used to the cellar.

Well, it was not really a cellar. It lay only two steps down at the end of a series of pantries, dairies, and wash houses. A sort of sunken cul-de-sac. It had been designed as a game larder. As you shone your torch upwards — the electric light did not reach so far down — you could see the great steel hooks, deep-rusted now, in the beams of the roof. It had a floor of badly cracked concrete.

"Just the place for coke," said Mrs. Cotton. It was late summer when they moved in, but, warned by her experience of the winter before, she had ordered four tons. And she had got them — Mrs. Cotton usually got what she wanted.

And as autumn turned into winter and winter into spring, and as Sam Cotton made his nightly, dreaded

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pilgrimage, sometimes for one scuttle, sometimes for two, the huge pile diminished.

As it diminished, a curious fancy grew in Mr. Cotton's mind.

There was something evil in that cellar. And the evil lay, he was sure, in the far corner where the coke was piled deepest.

He got into the habit of calculating how long, at his present nightly rate of progress, it would be before he uncovered this corner. Two months . . . One month . . .

He said nothing directly to his wife, who was not an imaginative woman, and inclined to be impatient with her husband's fancies. But he did suggest, casually and tentatively, that they might perhaps take on a resident servant. At the moment they had only Mrs. Tizer, who worked like a giant by day, but deserted them at 6 o'clock.

"I could never stand anyone living in," said Mrs. Cotton. "They'd get on my nerves."

"We could afford it," said Sam.

"It isn't a question of money," said Bella. "And anyway, it's quite unnecessary. Do I ever ask you to do anything except get the coke at night?"

It was true. She was a splendid manager. Twenty years younger than Sam, and five times as healthy.

"I don't even ask you to wash up," she said.

"I wouldn't mind washing up," said Sam. But he had left it at that. It would have been too difficult to have explained. And it would soon be summer — and the last of the coke would be gone.

A fortnight . . . A week . . .

He had noticed lately that a crack in the floor seemed to lead directly into the corner. It grew larger as he uncovered it.

That there was something in the corner he was now certain. He had lived a great deal of his life by instinct, and now all his instincts told him so. As the pile of coke diminished, as he bent, night after night, to fill the two steel hods, nearer and nearer and nearer to that corner, the corner to which the crack pointed, a prickling sweat broke out all over his body. His heart thumped, and he felt curiously light-headed. He had never felt quite that way before, but it reminded him of an occasion when, as a boy, he had fainted from overwork and lack of food.

There *was* something in that corner. Something unavoidable, something deadly, that would become apparent when the last scuttle of coke was removed.

But how would it be if the last scuttle — the very last scuttle — was removed by someone other than himself? Like everything in life, it was simply a matter of calculation. The daily woman filled four scuttles during the day. He filled two at night. It was like one of those card games in which you had to arrange your play so as to avoid holding the last card.

When he had seen the coke the night before there had been, he

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calculated, about sixteen scuttles left. Four would have been taken during the day. He would take another two — then Mrs. Tizer would take four more —

"You've been doing sums to yourself for ten minutes," said his wife. "What's wrong? Money?"

"Nothing's wrong," said Sam.

"Then hurry along and get the coke and we can get off to bed. I don't know about you, but I'm dog tired."

"We shall have to be ordering some more soon," said Sam, cunningly. "I don't suppose we've enough left for even three days."

"We haven't that," said his wife, briskly. "I lent a bit to Mrs. Tizer — she ran short. But you ought to be able to scrape up enough for tonight. They'll be delivering a ton in the morning."

With a curious leaden feeling which centered on the top of his stomach and the bottom of his chest, Sam Cotton walked heavily down to the cellar. It was as his wife had said. A pathetic remnant of coke and coke-dust covered the corner. The crack gaped, so wide now that he could almost put his fist into it. Two blocks of the cement flooring almost looked as if they had been taken up and carelessly laid down again.

Sam picked up the shovel and bent down.

It had come now, it had to be faced — as he had faced and outfaced other things in his hard life.

His heart was pounding so that it nearly choked him. One scuttle . . . then the other. The coke which was left would exactly fill it.

He stooped again and scraped the shovel on the floor. A blinding red light, an uprush of dizziness. He was on his knees, then on his face, his nose an inch from the crack . . .

"Murder," said the young doctor, savagely, to his partner. "Plain murder. Letting him go down, night after night, with his heart in that state, and grovel for coke and lift weights. But not the sort of murder she can be hanged for — more's the pity."

NEXT MONTH . . .

Another Second Prize Winner —

MICHAEL GILBERT'S *One-Tenth Man*

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We are happy to welcome the first appearance in EQMM of Theodore Sturgeon and Don Ward . . . Mr. Sturgeon — one of the "big names" in the field of science fiction — tells us little of his awards and accomplishments; but those of you who are science fiction fans know all about Ted. However, here is a little background that you will find revealing. His primary education, he says, was simply "academic parents." For his secondary education, he simply ran away to sea. For his higher education, he drove a truck, served as a short-order cook, did a stint of farm labor, and worked in hotels and in advertising. As a post-graduate course, he got married, and now he and his wife have a son Robin and a daughter Tandy. His hobbies? Maybe you will be surprised, and then again maybe you won't: they include a hot guitar and a hot-rod truck.

Don Ward got his Ph.D. more formally — in 1941 in political science at Syracuse University. He taught history and political science for five years, then switched to the publishing business where, for the past ten years, he has been deeply involved in Westerns and in science fiction, and for seven of those ten years has been editor of "Zane Grey's Western Magazine" for Dell. He is married to a beautiful blonde, has three sons and one daughter, and his natural habitat is Exurbia.

Mr. Sturgeon's and Mr. Ward's collaborative story is a tale of Western crime with emphasis on characterization. You will meet a strange triangle in Delia, Vic, and Roy — with the pent-up passions of long, shabby years, of calculating, hating, fearing, repressing, and, most dangerous of all, of waiting . . .

THE WAITING THING INSIDE

by THEODORE STURGEON and DON WARD

DELIA FOX STOOD IN THE CENTER OF the saddle shed, her face pale, her thin lips sucked in and bitten on, invisible. The Circle F's steady rider, Vic Ryan, squatted on his tall heels with his back to the wall and laughed at her. "All right, all right — I'll raid, I'll gun out your nester." He laughed again. "But under orders." He aimed the stem of his pipe at her. "The boss's orders."

"You know he'll never!"

"If I raid, he will," said Ryan easily. "And he'll give me those orders right up to and includin' the minute I kick in that nester's shack door."

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"You mean you want him to go with you?"

"That's about it."

"That's the same thing as saying you won't go."

Ryan shrugged and began to pack his pipe. "I reckon hell *could* freeze over."

She stamped to the door. "Catch a lot of folks with some heavy hauling to do, the day it does," she snapped, and went out.

Ryan took the pipe from his mouth and laughed again. He was not a jovial man and his laughter was ugly; but it suited his mood.

Through the open door he could see across the yard — see Delia Fox, stiff-backed, furious, as she stamped into the house. She was 38 years old, with a face five years older and a body twenty years younger, and time was when Vic Ryan used to look at that figure with something besides the familiarity of contempt. He peered back over the years at himself, and at her, and he wondered vaguely who those people were — the rawboned young cowboy who'd asked her to marry him, and the girl with ice in her eyes who had told him to own more than an old saddle and an iron skillet before he suggested such a thing to his betters. A long time ago . . . and never a word had he spoken to her since that wasn't strictly business. Yet he'd stayed, year in and year out, holding the Circle F together against all comers — against the weather, against lazy cowhands they had to put up with at the rates the Circle F paid, against drought, landslide, botflies, and even Delia's brother Roy.

At the thought of Roy he spat. Roy was younger than Delia, and that and his flabbiness were what had led Vic so far astray in the early days: who could have guessed that it was Roy's ranch — lock, stock, and chopping block? It had been Delia who handled the money, made the decisions, hired and fired. "Better see to the south waterhole today, Vic," Delia would say, and Roy would chime in, "Yeah, Vic, go clean out the waterhole." Always her order, her brother's echo. So marry into it; you can't do nothing to the boss's relatives, but a no-good brother-in-law rates a boot in the tail right after the honeymoon. So Vic Ryan had tried it, and she had spat in his eye — Delia Fox, queen of the range, the bitch.

And a year afterward he'd fallen over Roy Fox on the town trail, belly-down and puking drunk, but bragging for all that. Vic had brought him home and slung him into bed, but not before Roy had dragged him into the parlor and showed him the will by which Roy Fox's father, the old fool, had made Roy sole heir to the Circle F.

Something had happened to Vic Ryan that night, something so deep that he couldn't name it if he wanted to. It had to do with a woman who'd refused him because he had so little, when all the time she had nothing; it had to do with a pig-eyed jelly-belly who'd order a better man to do jobs

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he wouldn't do himself, any time his sister wanted something done. Whatever it was, it made Vic Ryan stay, not planning — because the thing was planned; not building — because it was built . . . just waiting.

A long wait.

And a longer one yet, he chuckled, before she gets Roy Fox to ride out with me to raid that nester. The nester had squatted in the narrow eastern end of the valley. There was bottomland there, dark and fertile, and good water. Circle F stock had winter-grazed there for years, although legally it wasn't Circle F land. The nester, a heavy-set, tow-headed stranger with a spavined wife and a rickety kid, hadn't sent any announcements around or even come calling; one fine day, there he was, with a dirty sod house and a plow and a team of oxen. Delia Fox wanted the nester out of "our" valley, boundary or no, and even if he was a full day's ride away. Vic Ryan wanted him out too, for somewhat less emotional reasons: he knew a successful squatter would bring another, and then fifty more, and goodbye free range. He took the trouble to ride into town and find out quietly if the nester had filed any sort of claim, and came back with the news that the nester had not — too busy, too lazy, or too ignorant; it didn't matter.

But Roy — Roy had shrugged when he heard about the nester, changed the subject when he heard about the claim (or lack of it), and when Delia started getting waspish about it, he started drinking. Vic Ryan understood. He knew it was only a matter of time before Delia would lay her ears back and *make* Roy do something about the nester, and the idea of facing up to a stranger was more than Roy could handle. One day he came into the bunkhouse, mottle-faced, red-eyed, and sat down on Vic's bunk. He started to call Vic a chummy "old boy" and Vic told him to get the hell off his clean blanket-roll and say what he had come to say. Roy said, "Sure, sure, boss," soothingly, and got up and stood weaving in the doorway, and suggested that Vic ride over to the east pass and see if some Circle F stock hadn't strayed up there, and on the way maybe warn off that nester, huh?

Vic told him to go do his own dirty work, whereupon Roy got up on his drunken dignity and said, "Damn it, Ryan, I can run things around here without you, you know."

Vic laughed in his face and told him yeah, but his sister couldn't.

But Roy had gone, all the same, and so had Vic Ryan. For at daybreak that next morning an infuriated Delia Fox had saddled up and galloped east, and a shaken and deflated Roy had crept into the bunkhouse to beg Vic Ryan to follow and stop her. For a long moment Vic stared at the quivering rancher and thought it over, and what tipped the scales he never knew, but he snatched up the fire-bucket, doused Roy Fox, and snarled at him to come on. They

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saddled up and got their guns and rode, and it wasn't until afternoon that they caught up with Delia. She had nothing to say to them at all, but kept on riding east, and they followed.

When they crested the rise and saw, down by the cliffs, the sod shack, Roy suddenly spurred up beside his sister and said, "You really got nothing to say to that man, Dele. We're off our land." He was chalky and shaking. Delia said coldly, "You're the one to say it. If you can't find the words in your head, get 'em out of this" — and she handed him a bottle of whiskey from her saddlebag.

Vic Ryan, watching, felt all his scorn and disgust of Roy Fox melt and slump into a puddle of pity: for the sight of the bottle was a bigger thing to the man than any insult, and Roy took it, drank a third of it without stopping, then looked at his sister with his eyes streaming and told her she was a peach.

They rode down the slope. What looked like a scarecrow in the scratchy garden-patch froze and cowered and ran bleating into the shack. That was the wife. What looked like a small white ape scuttled in after her — that was the kid. They rode on, passing the brush margins, and there were the oxen, the plow, and the nester.

Roy took another drink. Vic Ryan got his carbine out of its boot and laid it across his belt-buckle. He'd always liked a carbine. Delia sucked in her lips.

The nester broke and ran, and Roy Fox laughed a rich, deep man's-laugh and spurred his horse. The nester turned to look as he ran, his foot caught a clod, and over he went, withers and rump. Roy let out a roar and a Rebel yell and the nester scrambled to his hands and knees and leaped downhill once, twice, three times like a huge hoptoad. Then he was at the shack and inside, and the crazy split-rail and cowhide door banged shut.

The three Circle F riders cantered up and crowded the door. Roy's eyes were bright and his cheeks pink. "Outa your hole, gopher-boy!" he bellowed, and got maybe three syllables of the rich laugh out when the door swung again on its leather hinges and the nester stood there blinking at them. He was a big man, made even larger by the great mat of yellow hair and beard that surrounded his face, and by the tiny doorway that framed him. His thick left arm hung to the lintel above him, his right arm and shoulder were squeezed out of sight by the door-frame. Deep in Vic Ryan's mind was an indelible picture, and this man brought it blazing to him again: a bear he had once hamstrung with a bad shot, its useless hind legs crowded against a rock, its foreclaws flexing, its little eyes, dark but also incandescent, hurt and hating, reading Vic's face from side to side as it wagged its head; and it panted like this man — too fast, too hard, a harsh series of whispered moans.

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"You got to get off this land, gopher-boy," Roy exulted, still full of downhill speed and whiskey.

Delia said, out of the side of her tight mouth, "Three weeks."

"Yeah, three weeks," Roy said.

"Or we'll be back," spat Delia.

"Yeah, back," said Roy, "with a keg of gunpowder and a —"

But just then the nester said hoarsely, "No!" and pulled out that right arm and hand; and in it was a single-barreled shotgun which, at that range, looked like a field-piece. "No," the man gasped, "you go." He moved the gun. "Go, you go." His own huge inhalation sucked his lips shut with an audible slap, and they could hear the rest of the breath hiss into his nostrils; he could say no more with words, but only with the mad hurt-animal eyes.

Roy Fox squeaked like a booted mouse and rocked back in the saddle, to wheel; but he jerked the lines so hard his horse squealed and reared high, staggering forward. The nester stood right under the flailing hooves (and if he won't back up for that, thought Vic, he won't for anything on earth) until, for balance, the horse fell away sidewise, barely keeping its feet, and streaked away grunting and bleeding from the mouth, with Roy crouched low in the saddle and roweling away like a cyclist.

Delia's mount skittered and danced and then followed Roy's, less frantically. She cried, in the rusty, taut tones of a sparrowhawk, "Three weeks!" and let her horse gallop.

Vic Ryan cantered away from the shack slowly, half turned in his saddle, his carbine ready, all his attention on the shack and none for his horse, which he knew would follow the others. He sat that way, cramped and concentrated for an uphill mile, and still the nester filled the doorway, the shotgun in his hands, and they filled the air with hate and fear, until the hill crest intervened and Roy could turn to find the others.

Roy was just throwing his empty bottle at a hornet's nest. He missed it. "I guess I told *him!*"

Delia didn't say anything. Vic blew, short and sharp, from his nostrils, so hard he hurt his ears, but he didn't say anything either.

They rode three miles and camped, and in the morning dark, Vic rose and left them. He got back two hours before they did, kicked the hell out of Kewkie, one of the worthless drifting cowhands they had to hire, and got some sleep in the bunkhouse . . .

And now the three weeks were gone, and three days more, and Delia was trying to get him to go raid the nester and gun him out. She loco? he thought wonderingly. Seen her hot after things before — might's well try to turn a stampede with a willow switch; but nothing like this nester business, the way she's got her ears laid back. Vic shook his head slowly, rose and stretched, and went to bed.

It was the darkest predawn when he jolted up to a roaring and chattering. He sat up grunting, peering at

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the color of the night through the open door, sorting out the time of day from the noises he heard, then sleepily pulling the noises apart. It was Roy Fox, charging around the bunkhouse in the dark and calling him. He heard the flat of a hand strike flesh, and Roy's roar, "There you are, Ryan! Come up out of there," and the whimper, "It's me, Kewkie, Mr. Fox."

"I'm over here," growled Vic, and his nose confirmed what his ears had told him: Roy Fox was crazy drunk.

"Well, come on," Roy yelled. "We got a chore to do." He started one of his Rebel yells but got to coughing.

"Come on where?"

Roy Fox aimed himself at Vic's voice. "You told Dele you'd take my orders, right from here to that gopher hole?"

"The nester. My God, Roy —"

"Put up or shut up. You got my orders, you'll have 'em all the way. Come on now, jump, damn you! I'm go' git me a yella pelt and nail it up in the honeywell an' use it to —"

"Your sister ready to ride?"

"What you think I am? This here's a *man's* chore. She can stay here and keep house."

"Well, hell just froze over," muttered Vic. He pulled on his levi's and hung on the holster. He saw it all — his flat refusal to do this job unless Roy bossed it, Delia's determination to find some way, somehow, to make it happen. Enough of her rasping nag, enough firewater, enough — well, that would be enough. He sighed and got his hat. "Come on then."

They saddled up and rode.

Within the first hour Vic Ryan was so heartily sick of the whole project, and everything and everyone connected with it, that it took an effort of will not to cut away and head straight over the mountains to the south, leaving the valley forever. He had help, however, in keeping the course with Roy. It was that thing within him, waiting all these years, waiting for a certain something from Roy, a certain something from Delia. It had divined that he need not wait much longer.

It had better not be much longer.

Roy's voice went on and on in the dimming dark, exultant, laced with that rich, deep laughter, avid, eager. ". . . woman's fine in a kitchen and not too bad with her nose in a ledger-book, but the fightin' and the ridin's not for them. You been the places I been, Vic ol' hick —" this brought on a paroxysm of alcoholic appreciation from its author, but nothing from the audience — "you learn about ladies. They have feelin's. Sensibilities. Now that nester froggin' an' hoppin' down the hill, they can see a thing like that and only laugh." He laughed. "But the job we're gonna do, a little hollerin' when we stick 'em, a little red ink splashes around — you know — we wouldn't want the ladies in on that. For men's work — *men*," he boomed. He got the cork out of a bottle with his teeth. "The ladies, bless 'em!" He gurgled and went

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ahh shrilly; the sound recalled to Ryan the hoarse panting of the nester (or was it the hamstrung bear?). In revulsion he learned, on the instant, a trick of voluntary deafness, so that the universe contracted to the trail jerkily unrolling under the horses' hooves, sealed seethings from that impatient thing inside of him, and Roy Fox's voice became just a drone conveying nothing.

When next he tuned in the voice, the melody had changed. "You'd never know it to look at me," Roy was saying sorrowfully, "but I'm a man of culture, having received, back east, an enviable education, among people among whom, my sickly-hickly friend, you'd be lost among . . ."

"Give me a drink, Roy," said Vic, and took the proffered bottle and hurled it against a rock. "By gosh, it slipped right out of my hand," he said.

Roy Fox looked deeply injured. "I shall not chastise you for that, Ryan. I shall simply withhold my gentlemanly instincts and refrain from sharing the next bottle with any such piebald pismire as you." He broke out another bottle, drank, and dramatically corked it. Ryan disconnected him again, and lapsed into the jogging miasma he had just invented.

The growling of his stomach at length became noisy enough, and a mid-morning sun high enough, to call him back to an earth on which he had saddled up without breakfast. He pulled up and dismounted.

"Whassamatta?" Roy wanted to know.

"Eat something," said Vic shortly.

"I give the orders around here," said Roy Fox in an ugly voice.

"Order us to pull up and spread some chuck then," said Ryan wearily.

"Very well," said Roy with a grand wave of the hand. "You will halt here an' prepare shushtenance." He fell off his horse.

Ryan let him lie there and got a fire going. He broke out some Arbuckle coffee, put it in a can, filled it from the nearby brook, and set it on a flat stone in the fire to boil. He tore up some sourdough bread and put some bacon in the skillet. Then he stepped over Fox's prone figure and went through the man's saddlebags. He found one bottle, two-thirds gone. He put it back. He saw to his disgust that the man's rifle boot was empty; on a hunch he felt down inside it and found a pint flask of whiskey. He hurled it away into the woods. Then he bent over Roy Fox and pulled him to a sitting position.

"Come on, Roy. Soup's on." Fox merely mumbled incoherently and hung his head; when Ryan released him he sagged like a half-bag of oats. Ryan cursed and went back to the fire and ate.

For two endless hours Roy lay like that, defying shouts, slaps, and the smell of the powerful coffee. At last Ryan squatted on his heels and did nothing but wait. When Fox stirred at last, Ryan arose, grunting from pins-and-needles in his legs, and got

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the can of coffee. He handed it over without a word, and Roy Fox bent his head over the fumes. Without drinking any, he set the can down delicately and said in an apologetic tone, "Li'l eye-opener, y'know?" and pulled himself up beside his horse. He found the remaining third of a bottle, drank it thirstily, and said in a strong clear voice, "Now for some of that coffee — go just right." He sank to his knees, sipped twice, then gulped down the coffee. He was quite still for a time, then threw up his head, belched loudly, started at the sound, and looked all around him.

Ryan told him. Told him why, too.

Roy Fox just shook his head, wondering, disbelieving, denying — Ryan could not know. Ryan swung up on his horse. "Well, let's get it over with."

Roy Fox hesitated, then slowly followed suit.

They rode in silence for another hour, and then Fox began fumbling in his clothes, his saddlebags, even the rifle boot. Once was not enough; he searched again and again. At last he spurred up beside Ryan. "Got any whiskey, Vic?"

"No."

Roy fell back again. For another hour, silence. Once Ryan thought he heard weeping, but he could not bring himself to turn. Then, "Vic!"

Ryan moved over to the side of the trail to allow Fox to ride up, but he did not. "Vic?" he called again.

Ryan cursed, wheeled, and cantered back. "Now what the hell?"

Fox wet his lips. "What we want with that nester? What's he done to us?"

"What's botherin' you, Roy?"

"Valley's too small, him and us. Outside our land, takes a whole day to ride between . . ."

His voice expressing a patience he did not feel, Vic Ryan said softly, "What's the matter, Roy? What do you want to do?"

"Well, I don't know what the hell we're doing out here."

"Afraid Gopher-boy'll take your ear off with his shotgun?"

"That ain't it!" snapped Roy.

"You're like a steam train, Roy — you can carry just so much to stoke yourself with and when that's gone you quit."

"What are you talking about?"

"Guts. Whiskey."

"Now look, damn it, I give the orders and you don't ask why. Didn't you come out on my orders — didn't I tell you you'd have my orders all the way?"

"That was the arrangement." The waiting thing inside him fairly hummed with tension.

"Well," said Roy Fox smugly, "you'll ride back to the Circle F, starting now, with me, and that's an order." He turned his horse and started along the backtrail.

"Yes, sir, boss," said Vic Ryan, and drew his carbine — he'd always liked a carbine — and shot Roy Fox through the head. Fox stiffened, made an ineffectual gesture with both hands, and fell forward. His horse

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started slightly and then began to jog toward the Circle F. Ryan spurred his mount and he began to gallop, also toward the Circle F. "Yes, sir," Ryan said again. He drew alongside the other horse and caught the jouncing body just as it was about to slide off. "Whoa," he crooned, and both horses stopped.

Ryan dropped off, still supporting the corpse, and it was only then that the rage overcame him — a flood, a flame of it. Or perhaps it had been there all along, and only now emerged where he could see it.

Finally it washed by, leaving the husk of that waiting thing inside him, and some dull lumpy leavings at the bottom of it. It was this he had waited for, all these years, and what all the years of waiting had been for. All that was left was this nameless lump of leftovers. He'd scour that out too — he knew he would; he knew it couldn't be cleaned out here, but he *knew* he'd do it.

Time enough — time enough for all that. He was used to waiting for the time to come. He turned the body belly-down across the saddle and snugged it with a lariat, shoulders to ankles, under the cinch. Finished, he stopped to watch a mosquito treading the dead man's neckerchief with its delicate feet as it slowly made its way to the strip of flesh that showed between silk and denim; then he swung up into the saddle.

He was asleep when he reached the Circle F. It was after sundown, raining a little, and he awoke slumped in the saddle, with the dark bulks of house, bunkhouse, saddle shed, and barn about him in the yard. He climbed down stiffly and for a moment leaned his head against the arch of the horse's neck. His eyes closed and he very nearly slept again; he had never in his life been this tired. He straightened his back and struck himself roughly on the cheekbones with the palms of his cold wet fists, and turned to on the wet knots of the lariat. He pulled the body by its shoulders and it slid off into the mud while he respectfully held the head high enough so it wouldn't go down too. It was a respect indicating only how completely through he was with Roy Fox; he had nothing left for him — no vengeance, not even disgust. He dragged the body into the saddle shed and turned it over on its back in the dark there. He went out and shut the door and returned to the horses. He turned them into the corral and threw the saddles into the bunkhouse. He didn't know what he was doing, but he didn't have to. He hadn't been able to see in the saddle shed either, and he hadn't needed to.

Someone came in. A lantern. "Vic?"

"Yuh."

She said, "Where's Roy?"

"Saddle shed."

The lantern went away. He turned to where he had thrown the saddles on the floor and kicked them with his boot toe. The lantern came back. "What are you going to do?"

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"Sleep."

He stumbled away, but her hand held him. She said, "Don't stay out here, Vic." She led him to the woodshed, which adjoined the pantry connecting with the kitchen, and then across a floor and around a corner and through a door. The bed there was softer than a bed ought to be, but he was conscious hardly long enough to be aware of that . . .

Being dead turned the saddle shed into pale blue paint and a crazy-quilt, chintz, rag rugs, and a spool rocker . . . how was old Ryan making out in the house?

Then a slight sound from the doorway chased the dream, and he wasn't Roy Fox lying lifeless in the saddle shed but Vic Ryan lying here looking at — he clutched the quilt to his bare chest and gasped like a schoolgirl.

"It's all right," said Delia, coming in.

He had never seen her this way. Her hair, no longer skull-tight and bunned, was parted in the middle, and two braids framed her face. She wore a close-fitting robe with a huge skirt right down to the floor, and it was the palest pink at the top and gradually got to be scarlet at the bottom. She had lip-rouge on, too, but that wasn't all that was different about her mouth: it wasn't clamped tight and sucked in any more. She walked over to the bed and sank down on the floor until their heads were at a level and all he could see of her garment was the pale pink part. He cast a nervous glance over her head at the door.

"It's all right," she said again. "There's nobody around but us."

"What about Kewkie?"

"I sent him to town to tell the sheriff about Roy."

He tried to swallow but there wasn't anything to swallow. His mouth was dry as an alkali flat in a droughty August. "Tell him *what* about Roy?"

"How he got killed."

Vic Ryan didn't say anything.

"Got killed fighting with the nester," she amended.

His mouth opened and breath rushed in, but nothing could come out because of the cool hand she laid on it. "It makes everything come out right," she said. He wished she would talk without fixing her eyes so hard on him; he felt like a skunk pitchforked to a henhouse wall. She got larger, or moved closer, he couldn't tell which. "Vic . . ." she said.

He wanted something of this woman, and he couldn't name the thing he wanted. He knew, though, what he didn't want. "Where's my clothes?"

"Vic," she whispered.

"Where's my clothes?" She was still for so long that he turned to look at her. "Well?"

"I'll get them," she said in a low voice. She rose and turned with one motion so that she did not face him again. He lay looking out the window, eastward down the valley, and the only thought he could capture was

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something that couldn't matter now: Roy had been the only one at Circle F who didn't care if the nester came or went.

He heard the soft *plath* of cloth on wood, but did not turn his head until he heard the door close. Then he rose and for the first time in years dressed from neck to toenails in clean, ironed, mended garments. He found his boots by the bed — not the ones he had worn last night, but dry ones from the bunkhouse, all scraped and oiled.

He stepped out into the kitchen. Hot coffee steamed in a china mug beside a platter of eggs and bacon, a bowl of butter with the paddle-marks still on it, and bread that had to be oven-new, for he could smell it. "Dig in," she said.

He wondered why she had to speak before he could notice that she had changed while he was dressing; she now wore a simple, starched house dress with bright little strawberries and green leaves printed over it. He had seen her in the dress before, but never with her hair this way and her mouth all different. He sat down before the food, and saliva squirted so heartily he felt pain under his tongue.

"You sure fix everything the way it should be."

She shot him a quick look. "Everything?"

He ate, thinking hard about eating; but pretty soon he'd eaten it all, so he had to say, "Roy's dead. Ain't things a little cheery around here?"

"Yes!" she said fiercely.

"All right," he said. He watched her picking up dishes, the way she moved. "You thought right away it was the nester done it?"

"Anybody would think so — why not? Didn't he threaten us all with a gun? I was there. I remember. You were there. Besides, he's just a squatter and Roy had the right to drive him out."

"I tell my story, you tell yours, and everything's all straightened out."

"Yes," she said. Suddenly she smiled at him. He didn't like it. She asked, "Thought about what you'll do then?"

He hadn't but he did now, and there was no hesitation. "I'm going to get just as far away from here as I can get."

She came quietly and sat down opposite him at the table. "You wouldn't do that." She was gazing at him the way she had in the bedroom; he could feel it like heat on his lowered eyelids.

He muttered, "I couldn't stay here without . . . with just the two of us. People would . . . it wouldn't be right."

"It could be right, if —"

Slowly he raised his eyes. Hers were fixed on her hands, which turned and churned and pressed each other, trembling. Abruptly he laughed. "I still don't have but a saddle and a skillet!"

She colored. "Oh . . . you remember everything, don't you?" Suddenly she took his hand. It burned him. She said, "Can't you see it's all different now? I have all this

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— everything. And besides, you never could understand: it wasn't me who turned you down, it was Roy. Roy wouldn't chance a better man as a relative. If I'd married you, he'd have thrown us both out, or burned down the place if we wouldn't go. That was the one thing he prided himself on all these years — keeping you on, keeping us apart."

"I still don't have nothing."

"You do! You do! Or you would . . . I have the Circle F, but you have me!" she cried.

And now, only now, he knew what else it was that had been waiting — waiting all these years deep inside him — part and parcel of the thing he had relieved on the trail yesterday. "Ask me right out."

"Wh-what?"

"Ask me," he said. Something began to pulse, to kick. "Ask me what you want."

"I don't —"

"I'm going to roll my blanket," he said. "I'll leave as soon as —"

"Marry me," she whispered, and lowered her face to her arm.

He laughed. "I can't hear you."

"Marry me."

"Beg me."

"Why you — you . . ."

She stood up and looked down at his laughing face. "I do, Victor — I beg you marry me."

And that was the other thing, and that was all. His secret place closed down on itself with its secrets gone, and he could feel it healing; and he yelled, "*NO, by God!*"

When he looked at her face he was frightened. He sidled up off the bench, his eyes on her like those of a hypnotized bird, and backed off a safe two paces. For moments they hung like that, and then there was the thump and rumble of horses, and they turned to stare out at the yard. The sheriff, three deputies, the coroner, Kewkie. They dismounted, and went where Kewkie pointed — the saddle shed.

Delia's voice, when she spoke, had the frightening overtones of that hawk's shriek Vic had heard the day they warned the nester. She said, "Better have your story straight when they come in. It's got to be the same now as at the trial."

"I'm not worried."

"You should be," she said. "When we cornered the nester he ran for his gun. What he brought out must have been the only gun he had — a shotgun. Roy wasn't killed by a shotgun."

"All this time you —"

"I could testify the nester had a carbine," she said coolly. "And if you did too it would be the word of both of us against the nester. I'd be glad to testify that way, Vic, if you wanted me to."

"Well, I want you to."

"Matter of fact, there's a way to keep me from testifying against you — ever."

Steps on the porch, knuckles on the door. "Yes," he said blackly. "I know three ways." He turned his back on her and opened the door.

"Howdy, Vic. Miss Fox."

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"Howdy, Sheriff. You been in the saddle shed?"

"A second," said the sheriff. He was a gray little man with what looked like brand-new eyes. "Doctor's in there now. I saw all I needed. Sorry, Miss Fox."

Delia clasped her hands together, watching Vic Ryan. "Did you get the nester?" she asked the sheriff.

"He's safe and snug in the jailhouse," said the sheriff.

Vic's eyes met Delia's. With sudden, profound composure she inquired, "Well, what can we do for you now, Sheriff?"

"Just tell me what you know," said the sheriff. "Miss Fox? Vic?"

"I'll give you mine first," said Vic Ryan tautly. To Delia, he said, "Marrying you is the first way. This here's the second."

"What?" asked the sheriff.

"Nothing. Something we were talking about when you came in. Sheriff, I killed Roy Fox — shot him going away, on the trail. That nester, he didn't have but a shotgun."

Delia Fox screamed.

The sheriff blinked. "Well, that's enough to start out with. I'll have to have your gun, Vic."

"The carbine? It's in the bunkhouse. Or were you talking about this one?" and he unholstered his Colt and held it so it pointed exactly on the bowknot on the cotton belt of Delia Fox's starched house dress. "This here's the third way," he said softly.

Nobody breathed for a time. Then the sheriff said, "You better stop playing around now, Vic."

"Sure," said Vic, and handed him the gun. "I wouldn't shoot you, Delia. You're dead already. I hope you live to be a hundred and twelve and spend it countin' your money."

Delia Fox cast her eyes in one wide arc, taking in the shabby Circle F, its people, all its shabby years. She gasped, "But the nester —"

"Oh, that nester, sure," said the sheriff grimly. "You know, folks, I'd give a good deal to hear the story you were about to tell just now . . . guess I never will, and it don't really matter any more. The nester — I got him in jail all right. Had him there three days, going on four, tucked in safe and snug with his wife and kid. That's where he wanted to be, so we let him. You folks scared the chips out of that pore farmer; he wouldn't've stayed on his little spread past your deadline to save his everlastin'."

Delia covered her face.

Vic Ryan said, "Roy would've been real proud."

The sheriff said, "So you see how perplexin' it was to be keepin' a man in the jailhouse for his own protection, and then have someone ride in with the rumor he'd killed Roy Fox fifty miles away."

Delia whispered, "Vic, please —"

"Come on," said Vic Ryan to the sheriff. "Whatever she's got to say, I'd still rather hang." Inside, he felt good, the way a man must if he has everything, has done everything, he ever really wanted.

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Sports editor versus bookie . . . breezy as they come!

HANGING THE HANGMAN

by B. M. ATKINSON, JR.

OF COURSE THE NEWSPAPER BUSINESS ain't near as exciting as it used to be, but it has its moments. Like the other afternoon up in our sports department. This fellow went berserk, tried to wreck a teletype machine, strangle the church editor, behead a sports writer, and kill a bookie by dropping a copy boy on him from three stories up. Now, that may not sound exciting but being as how I was the sports writer I found it pretty exhilarating. So did the copy boy.

It all started about a week ago when Quincy Dumbarton, the sports editor, comes in smiling like his teeth are real. Before I can ask him who's dead, he escorts me and Joe Edmonds, the turf writer, over to the window.

"Boys," he says real confidentially, "we're about to hang the hangman. The grand jury is in session. The City Hall boys have shut down the wire service to the handbooks for the duration. The bookies are getting their race results relayed to 'em from across the river. And this grieves me! They're getting 'em two minutes later than we're getting 'em on our teletype machine."

He points a long, bony, quivering finger down at Big George's bar and book across the street. "You see the front table in that home for incurables down there?" he says. "A man sitting at that table has got a perfect view of this window. That's you, Joe. You're gonna sit there like Little Bopeep and I'm gonna be up in this window signaling you how the sheep come in. Especially them long-priced sheep. We'll —"

"Quincy," I say, "you wouldn't actually past-post Big George, would you?" Past-posting is betting on a race after it's over. You know the winner and the bookie doesn't. It's a pretty low trick, especially when it's pulled on a bookie like Big George.

He's a freak bookie. A hell of a nice guy. He's got weak eyes and a strong stomach, so he loves newspaper people. Feeds us, waters us, pays us track odds, and preaches that the race horse is to modern man what the lion was to the early Christians.

"Kelly," Quincy says, "for fifteen years I been thinking of things to do to Big George. This is the first thing I've thought of that I won't get the chair for."

Quincy's a little peculiar himself. He thinks he's the world's greatest picker of horses, and every day for fifteen years Big George has been proving to him that he's the worst

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since the Trojans. Naturally he blames it all on Big George instead of the horses.

"But, Quincy," I say, "Big George loves you. You're his hero. Big columnist, all that stuff. He —"

"He loves me like Jesse James loved the Missouri Pacific." He turns to Joe. "It's this simple. I get the winner off the teletype machine. If the eight horse wins, I sneak eight bottles up in the window. If the five horse wins, I put up five bottles. And don't worry about that blubbery bloodsucker not taking bets past post time. He trusts us. I just tested him. Lost twenty bucks."

Being an expert turf writer, Joe is the second biggest contributor to Big George's welfare. "We'll just nurse his neck into the noose!" he gloats. "Bet late on some losers so he won't get suspicious, then when a big winner comes along we jerk his thieving eyeballs out!"

Quincy calls Eddie, the copy boy, over and tells him to round up all the pop bottles in the city room and put 'em in the wastebasket by the window. Then he asks me if I want to cover the girl soccer games next fall. I don't, so I take an oath that I won't tell Big George about the blood bath they're drawing for him. Then they start borrowing money. They get about a hundred and Joe goes downstairs. A few minutes later we see him sitting real innocent at the table by the window in Big George's.

Quincy takes out one of Big George's form sheets that gives the horses' numbers according to their post positions, and he's all set.

About five minutes later the teletype clacks out the winner of the next race. Number seven. Quincy gets down below the level of the window and puts up seven bottles. He doesn't give the signal to bet, though. The pay-off ain't big enough. I see Joe go back and make a late bet on a loser so as to soften Big George up.

Then number five wins the next race. He's a fat one. Figures to be about fifteen to one. Quincy ducks down and puts up five bottles. Then he rises up and nonchalantly gives the betting signal — a casual drawing of the hand across the jugular. Fifteen minutes later Joe comes in looking like Nero just after he did in his mama.

"We got the lamb on the altar and here's the knife," he cackles, throwing a bunch of bills on the desk. Quincy starts thumbing through 'em like they were dirty pictures.

Big George takes another trimming the next afternoon. Joe comes back with just about a grand. "He's tearing my heart out!" he says. "He's begging me to quit while I'm ahead!"

"He's *such* a nice guy!" Quincy says. "Call up the poorhouse and reserve a cot for him in my name. He can't out-nice me!"

The next afternoon is it. It's got to be. The grand jury has got the cops scared and they're giving Big George and the rest of the bookies twenty-four hours to go out of business.

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Quincy is hovering over the teletype like he's trying to hatch it. The number two horse wins the first race. The price ain't right. Joe leaves the table by the window and goes back and bets on a loser. Number eight wins the second race. No price again. Quincy gives the teletype a shake. "Ain't you got anything but short horses! Lay me a long one, you monster!"

A half hour later he's got his long one. The winner of the third race is a notorious old goat named Dry Dock, the number sixteen horse. Quincy goes crazy.

"That's my Santa Claus horse, Kelly!" he whoops. "A sleigh full of goodies for old Quincy. Sixty to one if he's a nickel."

He rushes over to the window and gives the throat-cutting signal twice — shoot the works. Then he dives down and starts grabbing bottles. He's got those King Midas mumbles. "Eight hundred dollars on him . . . couldn't have closed worse than fifty to one . . . five bottles, six bottles, seven . . . forty thousand dollars . . . yachts, women . . . eight bottles, nine bottles . . ."

All of a sudden there's this shriek. He grabs me by the throat. "What'd you do with my bottles? I gotta have sixteen. There ain't but thirteen. Damn you, I'll . . . " He turns me loose and yanks a half-pint whiskey bottle out of his desk and slams it up in the window. He makes a dive for Joe's desk, gets his foot caught in the wastebasket, and falls on his face.

"Bottles!" he screams. "Bottles!"

He gets a pint gin bottle out of Joe's desk and planks it in the window. "Bottles! Just one more bottle!" He dashes out in the hall.

He comes back with a nice big pop bottle all right but old Jim Ferguson is attached to it. He's taking a drink out of it when Quincy snatches it out of his mouth.

"Turn loose, you old idiot!" Quincy screams. "I'll tear your arm off." He finally turns loose himself, dashes for the window, and sweeps all the bottles on the floor. It's too late. Joe has gone back to bet on the fifteen horse!

Quincy starts beating on the window. "No, Joe! Come back, Joe! Don't give that crook our money! No, you idiot! No!"

No use. He starts toward me. "I didn't mess with your bottles, Quincy!" I warn him. "It just wasn't in the books for you to break a nice guy like Big George!"

"Don't hand me that stuff. I'm —" He stops. Eddie, the copy boy, is standing in the door, watching us.

"Well, Jughead," Quincy snarls at him, "maybe you know what happened to my bottles!"

"Yes, sir," Eddie says, blushing. "I needed a little money, so I just borrowed a few of 'em and took 'em over to Big George's. He never gripes about giving me two cents apiece for empties. Big George is a real nice guy."

Right then was when that fellow I mentioned went berserk.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MARK VAN DOREN**

TITLE: ***Only on Rainy Nights***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Professor Eldred and the Inspector

LOCALE: A university town

COMMENTS: *A sensitive and tragic story about the differences in people's faces . . . with wonderfully stimulating conversation (a lost art?) containing a depth of Chestertonian paradox — like "when it is most present it is most invisible."*

"THE NEXT RAINY NIGHT," SAID the Inspector, "I'll take you over there."

His friend, Professor Eldred, reached for the tall glass he had nearly forgotten. "All right, I'd like to go. But you mustn't expect me to see more in him than you see. Your theory about us, I seem to remember, gives us credit for very little shrewdness when it comes — as in the present case it does — to looking at particulars. I'll go for the trip — a pleasure, always."

"No," said the Inspector, "I really want your expert opinion. And it may not be a pleasure to look at this particular face. I'd hate to think he was my son."

"Could he be?"

"That's academic humor." The professor nodded, confessing that it was. "No, he couldn't."

"Whose son is he?"

"His mother's, of course. The father I know nothing about except that he died when Root was a small boy. She is the proverbial poor widow — works hard cleaning other people's houses to sustain herself and him. He doesn't work, except for odd jobs now and then."

"Neither, I suppose, did the young man who was murdered. Were they friends?"

The Inspector reached for his own glass and considered its contents a while. He was a small, neat, reddish man, capable of intense and interesting silences. "A good question. Thanks, I'll keep it in mind. At least they were old acquaintances. They

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went to school together. Halfway through high school, when Root quit. Herrold went on, naturally, since his parents *aren't* poor. This summer was his second vacation from college. He came home on the tenth of June; by the fourth of July he had his sports car, muffler cutout and all; and on the twelfth of August we dug him up — down there in the woods. No, Herrold never worked at all, and I'll keep the fact in mind. Thanks, John."

Professor Eldred flourished his free hand — generously, but with the suggestion that he didn't know what he had been thanked for. "Why are you so certain he was killed for his sports car? It was found in the river, you tell me, not more than a hundred yards away. Couldn't he have merely lost control of it, run off the road and down the bank — been badly hurt — drowned —"

"And shot?"

"Oh! That's right."

"And then," said the Inspector, "you were probably about to say he buried himself. Incidentally, there was no water in his lungs."

"Of course not. Forget everything I have said. I was about to propose, though — and now I won't — that he was buried by someone else, for a reason as strange as you say this boy's face is when he walks in out of the rain. The whole point, I assume, is that something in the case strikes you as strange. So I was going to try to locate it in the motive for a burial — the motive, if you are right, of Archie Root. Whatever he did or didn't do, isn't that why you are taking me to Hadfield? You think I can read the history behind his eyes and ears. By the way, does he have big ears?"

"They do stick out a little."

"Did Herrold's?"

"No, from the pictures. Nice and flat — a smooth, well cared-for head. What are you driving at?"

"Nothing. But now I must go."

It was midnight, and the Professor never stayed later than that. Mrs. Eldred preferred to have him home. He went almost every Thursday evening to the Inspector's apartment — where there was no wife, no child — and had better conversation there than he was able to have with most of his colleagues. Though not with his wife, who always stayed up, or sat reading in bed, until he came and told her what the two of them — the Professor and the Inspector — had said to each other over their drinks.

Tonight Mrs. Eldred was more wakeful than usual; William, their older boy, was still running a temperature and had kept her busy as well as anxious. But the boy was asleep at last, and she called down from the top of the stairs: "Hello, dear. What did the old man have up his sleeve this time?" The Inspector was only 55, but she chose to speak of him as if he were ancient beyond compute.

"Wait till I come up. Is Bill all right?"

"Better." Then while Eldred undressed in their room she glanced at

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him curiously, although she yawned a little, and pursued her inquiry. "He *did* have something up his sleeve. I can tell by your faraway look. You're still thinking about what he said — or what you said."

"What *he* said." Eldred smiled — reflectively, so that she knew only half of him was home. "He developed an odd theory about us who teach — or more accurately, us who learn and teach. He said he was struck by it last Sunday in the bus station. He was there, looking for he didn't say what reprehensible person, and suddenly he saw the difference between our faces and those of other people."

"*Our* faces? You can't mean yours and mine."

"I could, but he didn't. He hasn't the luck to know you. He meant university people in general."

"Oh, yes, I forgot. I'm sleepier than I thought." But she sat up in her bed while he got into his.

"I told him he took too narrow a view of the matter. The kind of face he meant — why, anybody can have it. It is a question, I said, of how life is lived. I even promised to show him a couple of colleagues who don't live it in such a way as to have the kind of face he supposes we all have. It was his good fortune to see Osborne and Kramer waiting for a bus; they do look like that because they live like that."

"Like what, dear? I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Like me — the faraway look you just noticed. Osborne and Kramer are thinking men, and their faces show it."

"Absent-minded, you mean?"

"The popular construction. Or — excuse me, darling — the vulgar one. And it is quite adequate unless it refers, as it often does — and then it *is* vulgar — merely to the act of substituting some absent image for one that is present: last night's steak for tonight's hamburger, or Lucy for Mildred."

"I see."

"Not yet you don't. I mean it *isn't* that. The thing substituted is not to be understood as a thing at all; it isn't, that is to say, an image of anything. It is an *idea*. It is every idea. It is, in a manner of speaking, the whole truth and nothing but the truth — I am now quoting the Inspector. It is what a good teacher is staring at while he talks to a good student, or while the good student, more likely, talks to him. It is present for neither of them except insofar as their conversation has put it between them. But when it is most present it is most invisible — and therefore most difficult for others to see. But these two do see it — it is the only real presence for them. And if they form the habit of living with such presences — such abstractions — their faces tell the tale wherever they go."

"Even in a bus station."

"Yes."

"Or in this room."

"Certainly. The best place."

"Thank you, dear. But what did the Inspector say next? This must

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have been a prelude to something more specific. A double murder, maybe."

"Not necessarily. He has a mind, and it pleases him to use it."

"I'm jealous because he never comes here."

"He will yet. His hair is the same color as yours — what there is of it." Hers, thought Eldred, was beautiful in bed: a sunflower on the pillow.

"No, he never will. He despises women. But anyway, who did the double murder? Did he do it with both hands?"

"A single murder, sweetheart, and the Inspector doesn't know who did it. But there is a boy whom he is watching — in Hadfield, where another boy was killed —"

"I know. Tracy Herrold. They say it was for his bright red sports car."

"You read everything in the paper, don't you? Yes, so they say. But nobody got the car."

"I know, It was in the river."

"That's right. But as I was saying, a certain boy in Hadfield interests the Inspector very much. He goes there on rainy nights and sits in a hot dog wagon and watches him. The boy thinks he is watching the Inspector, but it's the other way around. At least, the boy has no conception of the Inspector's singular interest in his face — which he says is one of ours."

"Murder, Incorporated."

"Sh-h-h. The law has ears."

"Well, you mean the boy in Hadfield is an intellectual child. But if so, what has that to do with —"

"Ah, the very point. The Inspector, who has been brooding over the academic countenance, wants to know whether this boy — when his mind wanders as he says it does, when he sits there with a frankfurter in front of him and forgets that it exists — the Inspector wants my opinion as to whether he is seeing a bright red sports car, and perhaps a bright red stain on Herrold's shirt, or simply the whole truth and nothing but the truth about the universe and its component parts. A criminal would be seeing the car — or some hideout he was headed for — but about this boy the Inspector isn't sure. He doesn't hide out; he stays in Hadfield, and on rainy nights —"

"Oh, yes. Those. And his name — what is his name?"

"Now, now, Sally. But as to the rain — yes. I don't blame you for goggling over that. I did, and I still do. You see the Inspector first noticed the boy on such a night. Having business in Hadfield, he stopped in at the wagon for a sandwich and a cup of coffee, and was sitting there when the boy came in, wet to the skin, and the proprietor remarked: 'The usual? One hot dog for one cold gut?' Something nice like that, something subtle and understanding. It seems the proprietor had become aware — slowly, over six or seven weeks — of a correlation between bad weather and the appearance of someone who for the time being shall be nameless. He even spoke of it to the Inspector. He said, 'Sure as hell, sir, soon as it rains in he

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comes. Yet he don't eat it, either, when I put it down. Funny thing!' He said this so that the boy could hear. And yet the boy didn't seem to hear — or even to care."

There was a silence that made the Professor wonder if she had fallen sleep. But she hadn't turned off her light, and pretty soon she said, "The Inspector must have other reasons for watching him this way. Does the boy have a gun?"

"Herrold had one, in a red-leather pocket under the dashboard. He had large ideas — highwaymen, you know, and he the prince, or at least the rich merchant's son. One shot had been fired from it, and the gun put back in the car. They are sure it was the murder weapon — possibly grabbed out of its owner's hand and turned against him."

"Fingerprints?"

"Well, no."

"How was the grave dug? I understand it was short and shallow, and poor Tracy had to be jabbed into it with a shovel or something. Has that been followed up? Is *that* the reason?"

"Herrold had everything — a little folding spade, for instance. It was found in the trunk compartment, but it had dug the grave. Some of the clay hadn't washed off in the river."

"Fingerprints on the spade?"

"No."

There was another silence, and this one was the last. Eldred, straining over, turned out her light, and then his own. She might only be pretending to sleep, but he had no answers beyond the ones he had given. She asked good questions. All three of them really should go to Hadfield, but of course she wouldn't be invited. He wondered drowsily if the Inspector could ever be convinced that she was the one woman in ten thousand who might help him . . .

Saturday, the last day of September, was unusually hot and bright. But the late afternoon sky had clouded over; by five it was raining and blowing, and by seven it was merely raining — a monotonous, lukewarm drizzle that promised to keep on all night.

Professor Eldred, looking out of his study window, saw the many fine drops as they pattered among the linden leaves and dripped to the lawn. How did the Inspector, he asked himself, spend Saturday nights?

The doorbell was the answer. He went at once, but his wife was there before him, welcoming the Old Man — she somehow treated him as such — who nevertheless refused to step over the threshold. He was too wet, he was saying when he saw Eldred over her shoulder, and even then he wouldn't change his mind. He looked smaller now, thought Eldred, than he ever had in his own home.

"I'll wait out here," he said, "till you're ready."

"Ready?" Mrs. Eldred made an excellent show of not understanding.

The Inspector's eyes, shrewd under their sandy brows, expressed a polite indifference as to whether she under-

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stood or not. Perhaps, thought Eldred, watching them both, he knew she did. But he only said, "Your husband is going with me to Hadfield. I won't keep him long."

He hadn't telephoned in advance. It was queer, his certainty that the professor would be free on a Saturday night. As a matter of fact, Eldred hadn't yet eaten dinner; and the Kramers were coming over to spend the evening.

When these things were explained to the Inspector he said, "But I'll feed you out of the public moneys. And you'll be back in time to entertain your friends."

"Feed him?" Mrs. Eldred shook her head. "In a hot dog wagon?"

She had been deliberate, of course, in saying that. She now wanted the Inspector to know she had been told.

But he seemed not to have heard her. "Coming, John?"

And John went, the two of them so picturesquely different as they disappeared down the wet walk at whose other end the Inspector's car, invisible, revealed its presence as she listened sharply. He hadn't turned the motor off — he had been that sure.

Eldred said nothing until they were on the Outer Drive; the turn for Hadfield would be coming next. "I thought you would telephone first. This looks like an emergency. Is it? Has something happened?"

"Not a thing." The Inspector made the turn; Hadfield was now nine miles away. "But it's the kind of night I meant, and suddenly I decided — I hope your wife didn't think me too high-handed. I like her, by the way."

"You didn't even look at her."

"Didn't I?"

"No. Especially when she let you know I had talked to her about Archie Root."

"Well, of course not then."

"I didn't tell her his name."

The Inspector hesitated. "Good. But the general outline — you discussed that with her?"

"I always do. She doesn't miss a thing."

"Or *say* a thing? I mean, to others?"

"Oh, no. I'm sure she doesn't. Not that I give orders. But she wouldn't."

"Good. In a sense, of course, there *is* an emergency. He took a shovel with him down there this evening."

"What?" Eldred started; and perhaps unconsciously the Inspector slowed up a little. "Down where?"

"You know — or did you know? — we watch him. That is, we watch the place. People were coming there — they always do — and we thought we might pick up something from the way they acted. They stopped coming, of course, a month ago — except for Archie. Tonight the rain brought him out with one of those long-handled shovels. He wasn't trying to hide it — he simply had it, over his shoulder, all the time he stood and looked at the hole where Herrold was buried. I say he didn't try to hide the shovel. Of course he didn't know our man was there. He never does. But I

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think he would come anyway. A queer business, Professor."

Eldred pondered what he had heard. Perhaps a mile went by before he said, "It *is* queer. Nothing but a hole in the ground and yet he —"

"Nothing but. Yet for six days and nights before we found Herrold in it, mind you, it was not a hole. And somebody didn't want it to look as if it ever had been. Twice that week it rained — the first time, very hard — and the question is whether somebody was afraid then that the freshly turned earth would be washed away."

"*Some*body." Eldred contemplated the darkness flowing by them on both sides. "Possibly. And probably, you seem to be saying, Root. But then why *now?* What difference would a rain make *now?* Or at any time since — when was it? August twelfth?"

"Precisely. It's been a question with me from the start. But since I heard about the shovel, less than an hour ago, it has seemed — yet I don't want to exaggerate — an emergency. So here we are."

Eldred turned in his seat. "And where is that? What do you mean, an emergency?"

"I mean," said the Inspector, "there's no telling what a kid like that will do. I say kid — he's nineteen, but you will see how young he really is. You know, of course, that I think he did the job. The truth is, I'm *sure* of it, though I have no evidence beyond the way he acts. If that's evidence. So that's why you're here. I need your judgment."

"I see," said Eldred. "We should have brought my wife. Her judgment —"

"That could be, could be." But the Inspector didn't stop and turn the car about; nor did he speak again until they were at Duke's Diner, whose orange sign blinked cheerfully through the fine rain that still was falling.

"If you are hungry," said the Inspector as he got out on his side, "you will enjoy Duke's cooking. I often have — but then I'm no epicure."

"Neither am I," said Eldred, "but I do happen to be hungry. I may impoverish the State. Will *he* be there?"

"Should be." The Inspector looked up at Eldred. "Don't think you have to act any special way. He'll do that. He'll assume, as I told you the other night, that *we* are the exhibit. He'll figure us out, the two of us. So take your time, and eat all you like. Last time I looked, the public coffers were full."

Duke waved them welcome into a long, narrow room that smelled of T-bone steaks and fried onions. That's what I'll have, said Eldred to himself, following the Inspector to a white-topped table at the farther end. The stools at the counter were mostly unoccupied; three customers there, evidently good friends, had finished their meal and were hunched comfortably over coffee cups whose contents they stirred as they talked. And only one other table had anybody sitting at it. Archie, of course, said Eldred. There he is, at the end

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opposite us. There he is, already studying us, and probably more curious about me than about the Inspector.

The two of them sat down with the entire length of the diner between them and the boy whom Eldred had been brought to see. If that was who it was.

It was, he learned almost at once; for the Inspector's hands, flat on the table top, lay quiet except for one finger that lifted a little, pointing.

"Well, gentleman," said Duke — he had come suddenly to tower over them, his bald head shining like the largest light in all the place — "what'll it be?"

It was hard for Eldred to remember what he had told himself he would order, so aware he was of those black eyes upon him. Those eyes, and those pathetic ears — yes, they did stick out, as in a way the eyes did. Eldred thought of animals in danger — imminent danger, so that nothing moved except their eyes, and they only by intensifying, moment upon moment, the burden of their concentrated terror.

"A T-bone steak," he finally said.

"A big one," added the Inspector. "But not for me. I've had my dinner. Coffee with him later."

"Fried onions? French fries?" Duke gazed down at the two benevolently; he was proud because the Inspector had come again.

"Both," said Eldred, smiling; and as he looked down he again sent a quick glance over the empty tables. Root's eyes, intent upon nothing else than his, made no effort to conceal the fact. Perhaps they were unable to, he said, as an animal's are when it is cornered; it thinks only of the enemy that will not go away.

And yet there was a glimmer in them — although he believed the Inspector had overstated this — of some delusion as to their own visibility; some suggestion that their owner supposed they saw without being seen. The boy, that is to say, was thinking his own thoughts, and it could be, as the Inspector had said, that the nature of those thoughts was nothing as practical as would be the case if he were a criminal. It wasn't quite as if he were cornered, or even pursued at all; it wasn't simple fear that made the eyes so prominent, so painful. For all the strains upon it, and the streaks of dampness that had not been rubbed away, it was a distinguished face: a naked, thinking face. The Inspector had been justified in letting Archie's face fascinate him.

"You see," said the Inspector, "he hasn't touched his sandwich. He could have the same one every night and he wouldn't know the difference. I wonder if Duke has thought of that." But Duke was off behind the counter now, diving out of sight for mustard.

"You're right about him," said Eldred. "He's not afraid of you — or me, naturally. He's not aware of any person in the world — not really."

"Herrold?"

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"But he's not in the world."

"So you agree."

"Only to this extent. He's staring at something that isn't here for us to see."

"The place where Herrold was buried?"

"We *could* see that — I almost can, without having been there. You have only to remember."

"Sure," said the Inspector, closing his eyes. "I see it."

"But his eyes are *open*. The question, then, is what do they see. I wish my wife were here."

"For him to look at?"

"No. To look at *him*."

"Oh."

"But I think I know," said Eldred, "what she would advise us to do. If she were here, she'd do it herself. It is her way and it is a good way. She'd go over and speak to him. She would go right now. She would know he wanted her to do it."

The Inspector's hands slipped down into his lap. "You mean *you* know this? It's your idea?"

"I suppose so." Eldred didn't seem quite certain. "But it would be hers — I'm positive of it. She wouldn't wait a minute — assuming, of course, that you gave your permission."

The Inspector dropped his voice a little, though there was no necessity for this, what with the noises Duke was making at the counter, and the drone of three hump-shouldered men still idling over coffee. "What are you waiting for? I give it. Go ahead."

Eldred looked down at him. "Not without you." It was almost an order.

The Inspector shrugged his shoulders, squinting up at his tall friend. "No. This is out of my line. Beyond my depth."

"Nonsense! Come on." And Eldred stood up just as Duke arrived with an enormous platter, steaming and sizzling as if it still were on the stove. The Inspector rose too.

"What's the matter?" Duke was dumfounded. "Here it is and you —"

But the two of them walked past him as he set the platter down, and he watched them all the way to where the boy sat watching them while they came closer and closer. Then Duke returned quietly to his post, took up a rag, started wiping the coffee urn, and didn't look at them again.

To Eldred it seemed that Archie must have been waiting a long time for this to happen; the fear in his eyes, perhaps, was lest it never would. But the Inspector, whatever he may have thought, had to speak first.

"You're Archie Root," he said.

The boy blushed, as if his name had been a secret until now. But he continued to look straight into the officer's eyes.

"Do you know who I am?"

The boy nodded, then looked down at his hot dog, cold on its paper plate. He is starved, thought Eldred, starved in front of his own food.

"Do you have any idea why I'm here?"

The boy looked up swiftly — in relief, thought Eldred — and nodded again. His torn shirt was still wet

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from the rain — at least, around the shoulders. His hands were working in his lap — Eldred wished he could see them, or that Sally could. One of her deepest convictions was that hands reveal a great deal about people.

"Where is the shovel you had tonight?" The question came hard, in a new key, as if it had been shot forth.

Archie, visibly struck by it, started. But then he seemed to be glad the question had been asked. "Out there," he said. It was a thin voice, yet it surprised Eldred by its depth. "Out there by the door."

The Inspector went to the door, looked outside of it, reached to feel something, and returned at once. "Not very bright of me," he said to his friend. "It was leaning there when we came in."

But Eldred was saying to himself: he *wanted* it to be discovered. And then Archie immediately confirmed this much — and more.

"You saw me down there. I know," the boy said quietly.

"*I* didn't." The Inspector watched him closely.

"One of you did. I always know."

"Hm-m-m." The Inspector was somewhat off his balance. "Well, then, what can you tell us? This is Professor Eldred — from the University."

He makes me sound, thought Eldred, like a criminologist or something. What if Archie knew I taught English?

But Archie wasn't caring what he taught. "What can I tell you?" he said. He seemed to have no idea what the Inspector wanted.

"For example, why do you go there only on rainy nights?"

The boy hesitated longer than usual. Then: "He was my friend," he said; and now his hands came up to wipe his face clear of — Of what? Eldred wondered. Imaginary things? They were fine hands, if weak. "He was my friend," the boy said again. "I wanted his grave to look nice."

"His grave!" The Inspector almost shouted it. "But he's not there!"

"No?" It was said slowly. "That's right. But he was once. It was his grave once, and I wanted it to keep looking nice. He was my friend, and everything he had was nice. So his grave, too — I was afraid the rain would spoil it."

The Inspector stepped nearer the table. "You mean spoil it for *you*. Before we found him. You were afraid the rain would *uncover* him. You didn't put him deep enough. That other shovel, the little one —"

The boy sighed tremendously. His hands disappeared again beneath the table, his shoulders drooped, his whole body seemed drained of breath. He looked away and down.

"That's right, isn't it?" The Inspector pressed him. "You killed him. You killed your friend."

It was as if the boy himself had suddenly died. Right there in front of them. His head sank to the table, a heavy weight which all the rest of him could barely lift.

"Why?" The Inspector didn't spare

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him. This was the time to strike. "Listen to me — *why?*" He looked at Eldred, half in apology, then shook the boy's damp shoulders — gently at first, but after a while with greater firmness.

The firmness brought results. Archie, without raising his head, started to speak. Both men had to bend down to hear him. "I wanted his car — just for one minute I did. Never before, you understand. And even the next minute I said to myself: What would I do with a *car?* His, anyway. Just for that minute, though, I did think of all the nice places I had never been to. I could drive there, I could be there; *nice,* I said. So I told him I was taking it. He thought this was funny till I went for him. We weren't in the car then. He had stopped it to see about some noise under the hood. He picked me up after supper, and nobody saw us — nobody knew. There was that noise under the hood, and so he stopped, and we were just standing there. I went for him, and he ran to get the gun out of the pocket in the car. He never had a chance even to point it at me. I grabbed his hand, and — well, you know."

"What do I know?" The Inspector, bent over him, speaking very softly.

"You found him. You know. And that was when I knew I never wanted any car. Not his, anyway. But I didn't know what to do. The best thing would have been to go and tell."

"Why didn't you?"

The boy's shoulders heaved with another tremendous sigh. "I killed my friend. And it wasn't an accident. Or maybe it wasn't — I didn't know. I don't know now. But I did kill him, and I had that to think about. I couldn't think much then, but I knew I could after I got him buried in the ground. So I put him in the other seat" — the shoulders quivered a little — "and drove him down by the river. Yes, I used his shovel. They say I jabbed him in, but I didn't mean to. That was the worst of all — I didn't even know about it till I read it in the paper . . . Then I started the car, jumped out, and let it ramble. I knew you'd find it in the river. I knew you'd find *him.* I knew you'd find *me.* But I thought it would be long before now."

The Inspector waited, then he said, "It didn't need to be so long. You could have come any time."

"I know. But what could I tell you? I never got done thinking about it — never enough to understand, or to make you understand. There was a lot to think about, I tell you. My mother — she won't *ever* understand."

The Inspector coughed. "What is there to understand?"

Archie, sitting up suddenly, searched the Inspector's face. "Why, nothing, I guess. That was what I finally decided. Nothing — except that I killed my friend. If I can't understand it, nobody can. And so it makes no difference what anybody says. I did it, that's all. I mean, *you* have to know — the *law.*"

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"I'm not the law." The Inspector touched the boy again, but on the other shoulder. "I'm only this end of it. You have to come with me, you know. We'll go now, and you can eat — Professor! What about that steak?"

Eldred waved it out of existence. He was thinking: Sally ought to have been here; it went as she would have had it go; at least, I think so; I must see what she says; if I can only describe this boy — this child.

Duke was busy as they passed him, and the customers at the counter never glanced around. Later they would buzz and buzz; but now their silence was what the prisoner had to walk through. He did so, stumbling more than once.

In the car, when it was headed back to the city, the Inspector had one more subject to discuss.

"You saw me all the other times I was watching you there in the diner?"

"Yes, sir, I saw you."

"What were you thinking about those times?"

Archie was silent.

"What were you looking at? What were you seeing?" The Inspector glanced at Eldred to make sure he was listening.

"You," said Archie.

"Yes, but what else? Who else?"

Archie was silent again.

"Tracy Herrold?"

"Of course," said Archie. "Him."

"After you had —"

"No! Oh, no! Before! I saw him as he always was, with all his nice things. He was nice to me, too, you understand. I saw him that way, just as if I never — I never —"

But he had.

That was the incomprehensible part.

If you are a subscriber, you've seen this special subscribers' cover and heartily approved. In fact, it was in response to your requests that we began the experiment with a design emphasizing the contents, and you have been overwhelmingly enthusiastic. If you would prefer such a cover for your future copies of EQMM just mail us the coupon on page 138 — TODAY.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ROBERT CARSON**

TITLE: ***Code of the Underworld***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: "Harry Dane"

COMMENTS: *"Joe Bishop was a writer of mystery stories, the creator of Harry Dane, the toughest private eye of them all" . . . One of the "cutest" short-short stories we've read in a month of Mondays.*

JOE BISHOP WAS A WRITER OF MYSTERY stories, the creator of Harry Dane, toughest private eye of them all. He spent most of his time thinking about dead millionaires, slow-acting Asiatic poisons, and high-bosomed women. Occasionally, however, he had to give some consideration to his family, which consisted of his red-haired wife, Mildred; Timmy, his eight-year-old son; and a large, amiable Irish setter named Harold. It was generally Mildred who forced Joe to pay attention to his loved ones.

"Look, Harry," Mildred would say, "Timmy —"

"The name is Joe," Joe said. "You remember me — your husband. You're my moll."

"There you are," Mildred said. "That's the trouble. Joe, you're living your part too much. If I were you —"

"Sweetheart," Joe said, "I have to. If I go straight, we starve to death."

" 'Go straight,' he says!" Mildred said. "That's the way Timmy talks too. He acts like Harry Dane. You know what he calls Harold? A police dog. He calls a good Irish setter a police dog!"

"I'm surprised he doesn't call him a bull, or a flatty," Joe said.

"Even *I'm* getting so I talk that way," Mildred said. "I hate to go to P.T.A. meetings for fear I'll have to have the chairwoman rubbed out, or ask some lady if she's hot with the feds. Harry, this has got to stop."

"I agree, Mildred, I agree," Joe said. "The name is Joe . . . but I have to keep on working."

"Keep on working," Mildred said, "but lay off bringing your dialogue home. If you don't, I predict some-

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thing awful is going to happen."

After these sessions, though he was inclined to pooh-pooh Mildred's fears, Joe always tried to conduct himself carefully in Timmy's presence. He would talk to the child about nature, urge stamp collecting on him, or offer to take him to a museum. But Timmy wasn't much interested. He loved his father, and admired him as a colorful, dangerous character. Because Joe also loved and admired Timmy, he inevitably reverted to his Harry Dane role to please him.

So Mildred kept on predicting dire things to come. One day she was proved correct. She called Joe at his office. "Okay, Harry," Mildred said. "We've had it. Timmy has pulled his first job."

Joe rushed right home. He found his wife in the living room, pacing up and down. She was pale to her red topknot. "It's like I warned you," she said. "He's a thief."

"Let's not raise our voices, sweetheart," Joe said. "Simmer down. Who'd Timmy knock over?" But he had grown very pale, too.

"Mrs. Ebertson came to call — she's three houses down on the other side of the street — and we had tea, and then I took her up to see how I'd fixed Timmy's room. There was the stuff."

"The swag, you mean?" Joe asked. "What did he heist?"

"Two pillows and one of Mr. Ebertson's shirts," Mildred told him.

"Burglary, huh? Breaking and entering."

"You can't pin that rap on him," Mildred said. "The pillows were in the Ebertson back yard being sunned. The shirt must have fallen off the clothesline. It had grass stains on it."

"Well, well," Joe said, dazed by wonderment, horror and a grudging admiration. "Any confederates?"

"How do I know?" Mildred demanded. "The suspect clammed up when I gave him the third degree . . . Why am *I* talking this way?"

"You have done a good-enough routine job of investigation," Joe said, "but what we need now is —"

"Harry Dane, or whoever you are," Mildred said loudly, "I blame you for this. You and your damned blondes in their nightgowns, and your tommy-guns, and those Aztec daggers that turn up between some millionaire's shoulder blades. I ought to belt you one. I ought to leave you and take Timmy with me."

"I will disregard your unkind and uncalled-for remarks," Joe said, "and interrogate the prisoner myself."

Joe waited until after Mildred had put Timmy to bed and heard his prayers. Then he went in and sat on the edge of the bed. "Timmy, a boy's best friend is his father. You can sing to him, see? He can always come up with a mouthpiece. You agree?"

"Yes, sir," Timmy said.

"I hear you pulled a job. That isn't right, sweetheart. It's not done. Who's in your mob? Why did you do it?"

"Nobody. I didn't pull any job."

"Then who did? How did those hot pillows get here?"

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"I don't know, Daddy," Timmy said. "Anyway, I'm no canary."

A long argument ensued. The suspect denied everything. Joe's voice got louder. From fatherliness, he turned to fixing the boy with the steely eyes of Harry Dane.

"Listen to me," Joe said. "Either you come clean or I let you have it. Nobody gives the run-around to Harry — uh — Joe Bishop, see?"

Timmy began to cry, and Harry Dane went all to pieces. He kissed his boy, tucked him under the covers, had him say his prayers again, and made him promise it wouldn't happen a second time — even if Tommy didn't do it, as he said.

"Well?" Mildred asked when Joe came out.

"Well," Joe said, "his story didn't hold up. I got his promise to go straight and put him on parole."

The uneasy peace lasted exactly two days. Then Joe had another frantic telephone call and went tearing home. On the living-room floor lay a green-stained corset and a pillow with a Yale banner sewed across it.

"Harry —" Mildred said brokenly. "Joe — he's gone over the wall again. The Farrell place, I think, four doors down. Farrell went to Yale. Joe, what are we going to do?"

Joe took her in his arms. She was shaking. "Relax, sweetheart," he said. "I'll figure an angle."

She went off in tears, and Joe sank into a chair. He hated the idea of going to see Timmy, who was in solitary.

Suddenly he heard a scratching on the front door and realized Harold was asking to get in. He got up and opened the door. In the intelligent dog's mouth was one man's brown wool sock. Harold laid it proudly at Joe's feet and wagged his tail. Joe bent down and kissed him on the nose. "You call yourself a police dog," he said. "You're still a retriever, Harold, and man's best friend."

He gave Harold three biscuits, and went upstairs to see Timmy. His son was in bed, oiling a toy pistol.

"I'm cleaning my rod," Timmy said. "Mama has me doing time again."

Joe hugged him. "Timmy, I apologize for thinking a private eye like you could have gone crooked. Why, this is the finest thing I ever heard of —taking the rap for a lousy, small-time racketeer like Harold."

"I told you I didn't swipe anything, Daddy," Timmy said. "I work with the bulls. But I was afraid you'd lick Harold if you found out."

"Yeah," Joe said thoughtfully. "And now we've broken the case, Mama will kill him. Timmy, we've got to keep this caper from her. We tell her you're a two-time loser who has seen the light because he's afraid he'll get life the next time. Also, we give her a song and dance about being G-men now, and keep the private-eye stuff between ourselves, see? And we keep Harold on a leash. No squealing?"

"Yes, Daddy," Timmy said. "I'll keep my lip buttoned."

"You and me and Harold — we've got the start of a nice little mob here," Joe said.

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"An Ingenious Defense" is an extremely ingenious story to have been written more than 75 years ago and to have been published, as so often happened in those "good old days," anonymously. Almost as interesting as the story itself is its source. It first appeared, unsigned, in the April 28, 1877 issue of a British weekly called "The Leisure Hour." The title of the periodical derived from two lines by Cowper: "Behold in these what leisure hours demand, Amusement and true knowledge hand in hand." Each issue of "The Leisure Hour" sold for one penny (British currency) and consisted of 16 pages, printed in two columns, and charmingly illustrated. To give you some idea of the pictorial flavor of the magazine, we are reproducing on the facing page (in much smaller size, of course) the original title page of the volume in which we discovered "An Ingenious Defense." The decorative quality is exquisitely of the period.

"The Leisure Hour" offered, in each and every issue, the most varied and stimulating "amusement and true knowledge." For example, the issue of April 28, 1877 contained, in addition to the clever legal detective story, "An Ingenious Defense," a serial titled "A Young Wife's Story" (Chapter XXVII*), an article called "Beania: The Initiation of Freshmen at Upsala," a profile of "The Late Sir William Fairbairn," an historical piece on "Stratford-Upon-Avon in 1819," a bibliographic inquiry into Milton's "Paradise Lost: The First Edition," and a selection of so-called "Varieties" (random paragraphs) on such sundry subjects as "Artist Life in Rome," "An Eastern Voyage Seventy Years Ago," "Chinese Opium Traffic," and "Hogarth's Picture of the Red Sea."*

After all these years, we salute "The Leisure Hour" and the enterprise, resourcefulness, taste, and discrimination of its Editor: he (or she, or perhaps they) had an editorial policy after our own heart!

AN INGENIOUS DEFENSE

(*AUTHOR UNKNOWN*)

MR. SERJEANT VAUGHAN (AFTERwards Mr. Justice Vaughan), while on his way to Chelmsford assizes, met with an intelligent and pleasant fellow-passenger on the coach. What happened on this occasion is narrated by Mr. James Grant in his book on *The Bench and the Bar*. Mr. Serjeant Vaughan was, on such occasions, very fond of what he used to

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call a little agreeable chat with any talkative person he chanced to meet. He was not long in ascertaining from his companion that he also was going to the Chelmsford assizes, which were to be held on the following day.

"As a juryman, no doubt?" said Mr. Vaughan.

"No, sir, not as a juryman," said the other.

"Oh, as a witness, I should have said."

"Not as a witness either — I wish it were as pleasant as that."

"Oh, I see how it is: you are the prosecutor in some case which is painful to your feelings. However, such things will happen — there is no help for them."

"You are still wrong in your conjecture, sir. I am going to pay away money for a relative who has a case at the assizes."

"Ah, that's it! Very unpleasant, certainly, to pay money," observed the learned serjeant.

"It is, indeed, for those who have little to spare," observed the other.

"It is not a very serious amount, I hope?"

"Why, the magnitude of the sum, you know, depends on the resources of the party who makes the payment."

"Very true, certainly very true," said Mr. Serjeant Vaughan.

"The sum is £500, which, to one of my limited means, is a very large sum indeed."

"Oh, but perhaps you expect to be repaid later?"

"That is most uncertain. It depends entirely on whether my relative, who is an innkeeper, succeeds in business or not."

"Well, it is undoubtedly a hard case," observed Mr. Serjeant Vaughan, with a serious and emphatic air.

"Ay, you would certainly say so, if you only knew it all."

"Indeed! Are there any peculiar circumstances in the case?"

"There are, indeed," answered the other, with something between a sigh and a groan.

"Is the matter a secret?" inquired Mr. Serjeant Vaughan, his curiosity now wound up to no ordinary pitch.

"Not in the least," said the other. "I'll tell you the whole affair if you don't think it tiresome."

"I am all anxiety to hear it," said the learned gentleman.

"Well, then," said the other, "about six weeks ago a respectable corn dealer of London, while on his way to Chelmsford, met, on the coach, with two persons who were perfect strangers to him. The strangers soon entered into conversation with him, and having learned the object of the corn dealer's visit to Chelmsford, said that they also were going there on a precisely similar errand — namely, to make some purchases of corn. After some further conversation, it was suggested by one of the strangers that it would be much better for all three if they could come to a mutual understanding as to what amount of purchases they should make — for if they went into the market 'slapdash' and without any understanding, the result

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would be that in so small a place as Chelmsford they would simply cause the prices to rise; whereas by operating slowly and in concert that would be avoided.

"The second stranger pretended to approve highly of this suggestion and further proposed, in order to show that no one had the advantage of the other, that they should all three deposit their money in the hands of the respectable landlord of the principal inn, taking care that they did so in the presence of witnesses, and that special instructions should be given to the landlord not to give up a farthing to anyone until all three returned together to receive the whole. The first stranger then added that if the landlord violated the special instructions, he — the landlord — would be held responsible.

"The London merchant, knowing the landlord of the inn to be a man of undoubted respectability — the landlord is my relative, you understand — at once assented to the proposal, and each of the three accordingly placed in the landlord's hands, under the circumstances stated, £250 — making £750 in all."

"Well," observed Mr. Serjeant Vaughan, "you certainly interest me in your singular story. And what was the result?"

"Why, this: scarcely had the three men left the inn a minute, when one of the two strangers — the one who had been the spokesman with the landlord and had made all the arrangements with him — came running back, and said that, on second thought, they had all come to the conclusion that it would be better to make their purchases as early in the day as possible, and that consequently the other two had desired him to return and get the money."

"And your relative, the landlord, gave him the whole sum?" interposed Mr. Serjeant Vaughan.

"He did, indeed — unfortunately for himself and for me," answered the other.

"And what followed?" inquired the learned gentleman, eagerly.

"Why the other stranger and the London merchant returned about an hour later and demanded their money — £250 each."

"When the landlord, of course, told them he had given it all to the first stranger?"

"He did."

"On which, I suppose, the second stranger and the merchant are now bringing action against the landlord?"

"Precisely so. And seeing that defense is useless, inasmuch as the landlord delivered the money to one when his instructions were peremptory not to deliver it until all three were present, my relative is allowing the action to go undefended. The money must be paid to the sharper — for both strangers, as events have proved, were sharpers — and also to the London merchant."

"And you really have made up your mind to pay it?"

"Oh, certainly — there is no help for it."

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"I am a barrister and I will be happy to defend the case for the poor landlord gratuitously."

The other tendered him a thousand thanks for his kindness, but expressed his apprehensions that all efforts at defense would be perfectly useless.

"We shall see," said the serjeant, "we shall see. You and your relative the landlord will call on me this evening at eight o'clock, to arrange for the defense tomorrow."

Tomorrow came and the case was duly called in court. The poor innkeeper, acting on the advice of Mr. Vaughan, but not perceiving in what way he could be benefited by it, defended the case. Everything proceeded so favorably for the prosecution for some time that even though every person in court deeply sympathized with the unfortunate landlord, they saw no possibility of any result other than a verdict against him.

But Mr. Serjeant Vaughan, when the case for the prosecution was closed, rose and said, "Now, gentlemen of the jury, you have heard the evidence adduced. You have seen it proved by unimpeachable witnesses that the defendant received the most positive instructions from all three not to deliver up the money, or any part of it, to any of the parties except in the presence of all. Gentlemen, my client has got the money in his possession, and is ready to give it when *all three parties* come to demand it. Let the absent party present himself, in company with the other two, and everyone will have his money returned to him."

The prosecution looked amazed. The verdict was, of course, for the defendant. It is unnecessary to add that the man who had absconded with the money never returned, and that consequently the landlord never had to pay a farthing of the amount.

It might have been more equitable to share the loss of the honest corn dealer, but a London merchant deserved to pay *something* for his experience.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Cecil E. Parson's "The Folding Knife" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest — indeed, it is one of the best "first stories" it has been our privilege to publish in years. You will find a sensitivity in Mr. Parson's "The Folding Knife," and a kind of poetic observation, far beyond what you would normally expect in a "first story"; you will find, too, that the characters are well realized and that the whole story has strong emotional impact . . . The author was graduated from Birmingham-Southern College, in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1941 — "somehow Phi Beta Kappa," he says; but we have noticed that election to Phi Beta Kappa is no accident, is never just "somehow." Mr. Parson was navigator of a DC-3 under Troop Carrier Command in the invasions of Africa, Sicily, and Italy — "a minor role," he says; but it is obvious now that we are dealing with a modest man. At the end of the war he shed his wings and captain's bars in the great state of Texas, and "of his own free will" married a Texas girl. At the time he wrote "The Folding Knife," Mr. Parson was 37, an advertising manager in Indianapolis, and "the rebel father of two young Texans and a Hoosier, a refreshing combination [he says] with nuclear possibilities."

We like this man.

And we hope to see more — much more — of his work.

THE FOLDING KNIFE

by CECIL E. PARSON

EVER SINCE HE WAS OLD ENOUGH, Corbie remembered how the people of The Narrows always described Dub McDonald. Peculiar, they said. And by the cut of their eyes when they said it, and the way they switched the conversation to lighter gossip, Corbie knew he must stay away from Dub, his own uncle.

Perhaps the stories began because of Dub's hat, an old black beaver worn at the wrong angle on his huge head, or the coat that swung like a blanket around his rattling frame, its pockets bulging mysteries. Most of the legends were planted in Dub's wake by mothers who wished only to scare children to bed on summer evenings. So it was little wonder that Dub McDonald kept to his cabin,

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with only his hunting and a garden to feed himself, his gloomy hound, and his wife Livy.

Bart McDonald lived across the creek a hill away, but even he never saw his brother for months at a time. Bart blamed Dub's strangeness on the Mexican War. Dub had been a hero in Texas, Bart said; but two years in a moldy dungeon with bread and water had drained Dub's soul of humor, leaving only the dry crust of a man to walk the back trails alone.

When Livy died — some said of loneliness — Dub and the Preacher Cainey buried her as she had lived, in loneliness. Dub had closed the grave before the Preacher came. There was some talk about her death, and even a question whether she died at all. Some people wanted to open her grave and see, but nothing came of it except more stories which grew more dismal each time around.

Four years later, when Dub crossed over into Kentucky and brought Alice Ledbetter back through The Notch to live, the women decided this was their chance to lure Dub and his new bride into circulation.

At supper Lisette poured Corbie another cup of milk and said to Bart, "I've asked some of the women to go with me. It's only fair we give this poor girl a chance to visit neighbors, Bart! She's here alone, knowing not a soul for seventy miles across the mountains."

Bart frowned. "You'd best stay away. Dub picked his wife, and she doubtless knows what to expect of such a man. I wouldn't go, if I were you."

Over his cup Corbie saw Lisette toss her black hair stubbornly, and knew that she would go. "Can I go, too? I want to see. Please, Maw!" His eyes pleaded until Lisette surrendered.

The ladies found Dub's cabin scrubbed clean already, smelling strong with lye. And Alice Ledbetter was a real surprise: a pale blonde woman, small and willowy, with a smile that reached out to them. She thanked them for their gifts: Trudy Meredith for the cake, Lisette for two jars of crabapple preserves. And her quick hands caressed the starched doilies from Sarah Frost and Coleen Burden.

"I dearly love to knit and crochet, just love it! And I'll give you all something from me soon as I'm settled. I promise!" They discovered new interests as fast as they could talk, and the visitors were marveling at what a splendid neighbor Alice McDonald would make when Dub's unexpected tread on the porch stilled the conversation.

But not Miz Alice. She embraced her husband on the threshold. "Dub, look at all the wonderful presents these kind ladies brought us!" She managed to pull him inside, but only just inside the door. Quickly Alice exhibited the gifts, praising each one equally as she introduced the lady who brought it. Dub nodded woodenly, unsmiling, his pale gray eyes looking through the women, expressing nothing. Then Alice began to falter at his

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coldness until she came to a halting stop, embarrassed and confused.

The ladies said goodbye long before they intended to. At the woods they turned to wave the customary farewell. Miz Alice gestured wanly from the door; and, without knowing how they knew, all knew it was goodbye.

Back at home, Corbie played on his knees, building a fort beside the chimney. He turned to find another stone, and almost put his hand on the huge foot in the dusty shoe. His startled eyes climbed the brown jeans and long coat to the hat so broad it darkened the sky. How long Dub had been standing beside him, he did not know.

Dub followed us home, Corbie thought; he was right behind us all the way.

In each hand Dub held a fruit jar. He stooped, his face close to Corbie's, and put the two jars on the ground. "Give these back to yore Maw." Then he wheeled into the woods, not using the trail but cutting straight through. The moment the cool woodshadow touched him, Dub disappeared.

Corbie ran to tell Lisette.

Next morning Lisette placed the two jars of preserves in Corbie's arms. "You take these across the creek to Uncle Dub's cabin and give 'em to Miz Alice. Don't give 'em to anybody else! Tell Miz Alice I give her these to keep. Can you remember, Corbie?"

He nodded. Lisette called after him: "You hurry right back, Corbie, you hear!"

"Well now, that was right thoughtful of Miz Lisette to send these back," smiled Miz Alice at the door. "And you're a right smart boy to bring 'em all this way. I may have a cookie and a nice cup of milk handy. Want some?"

"Maw told me to hurry."

She sensed his objection: "Oh, you're worried about Dub! He won't be back for a spell. Come on in, and I'll tell your Maw I made you stay. I'll read you a picture book!"

Miz Alice could read even better than Lisette. She put her arms around him to point the words, and he felt her strong heartbeat against his shoulder. Her warmth was different from his mother's; her touch set him a-tingle. He decided that he liked Miz Alice, liked her so much that he wanted to see her every day. But he thought of Dub again and his oblique glance sought the door. "Maw's waitin' for me," he said. "I bet she's screamin' fit to thunder. I got to go!"

She followed him outside. "Please come again. I'd read you other stories, and we could eat more cookies . . ."

"If Maw'll let me."

She put both hands on his shoulders. "It's something else. You're afraid of Dub. Why, Corbie? He's your father's own brother, your own uncle. I know he's different, but all people

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are different in many little ways. Dub's suspicious and shy. He's afraid of people, and people think him queer because of it. Why, he's even jealous of me. Me, can you imagine! Now tell me, what has Dub done to you?"

Corbie's lips set in denial. He could not say that Dub scared him, that he looked at him and wanted to run. Everybody was afraid of Dub.

She kissed him, laughing when he dodged her. "All right, then. I'll come to see you. May I?"

"Yes, Ma'am. You can come anytime! And bring the book, too."

"Wait!" She bounded over the threshold and returned with the book. "You keep this — a gift from me. And when I come I'll bring another book. I'll read that to you!"

He took the book and ran.

Every day he watched the trail, but she did not come. A new hunger gnawed in him. At noontime he would think: Today she'll come — and then he'd scan the trees hoping to catch the splash of sunlight on her white dress. And at night when Lisette read from the book, his thoughts drifted to Miz Alice. One night Corbie said, "Maw, take me to visit Miz Alice."

Lisette studied him curiously. "Why, Corbie? We shouldn't go back until she comes to see us. Why do you want to go and no playmates there?"

He could not say: Because she's nice, she makes me want to sing, she feels warm and alive when she brushes past — she gives me a feeling I never had before. He could not say: Because I love Miz Alice.

So he decided to go alone. In return for the book he would take her a special gift: his knife, his folding knife that Bart had given him on his eighth birthday. That night he oiled and honed the treasure until no trace of use remained.

Next day he sneaked away, and slowed to a walk only when Dub's cabin lay still and silent in the clearing before him. The dog was not tethered under the big catalpa, and Dub went nowhere without the dog. So Dub was gone.

A single curtain hung partly outside a sill, as if to say no one was home. A fear seized him: Miz Alice is gone too; she's run off and left Dub and she's over the mountains by now.

He ran to the nearest window and bounced on the balls of his feet to see inside. The bed was made, with the corners of the counterpane straight. Dub could never make a bed as neat as that. Heart pounding with hope, he searched for other signs. Back of the cabin, ashes still smoldered under a black washpot.

Then he heard her in the kitchen and stopped short, listening. Once before, at a funeral, he had heard a woman cry with the same asthmatic, near-silent sobs. He crept to the door. Miz Alice's head lay in her folded arms on the table, her shoulders shaking.

"Miz Alice," he whispered. "Miz Alice! It's me, Corbie."

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With a gasp she pushed back her chair and ran to him, hugged him close. "Corbie! How glad I am you came!" She searched his face to learn what he might have divined from the scene. "You shouldn't have caught me like this. Isn't it awful! Me, crying!"

Laughing now, she wiped her eyes on her apron hem. Then she skipped to the mirror and brushed her hair till it shone again.

"Why didn't you come?" he asked.

She feigned surprise. "I — did tell you I was coming, didn't I? You know, I planned every day — every day! And I reckon I just got busier and busier. Corbie, I really meant to come."

He thought: She cain't lie to me — her eyes are just like a picture book. "I know why," he said firmly.

Miz Alice reached into the cupboard and brought out milk and cookies.

"I made those cookies just for you. Like 'em?"

He nodded and, remembering the gift, squirmed his hand deep into his pocket. "I brought you somethin'." He laid the knife on the table. "It's all I had that you can use."

"Why, Corbie!" She pulled the blade open. "A knife with a folding blade. How wonderful!" Then she opened his fingers and closed them around the knife. "You must keep it, Corbie. Your thinking of it was gift enough for me."

Hurt sprang to his eyes. "Don't you want it?"

"Oh, yes, more than you know!"

He relaxed. "You keep it, then." When she saw that her refusal would hurt his feelings more than she could bear, she thanked him and laid the knife on the table. She read to him again, until Corbie knew he had to go. The words were on his lips when they heard Dub tethering the hound to the catalpa tree.

Miz Alice whispered sharply, "Corbie, he mustn't catch you here!"

"I ain't afraid of him," Corbie said stoutly. "I hate him!" But her eyes wildly searched the room.

"In here — in the cupboard. He'll leave again once he's had his dinner — Please, Corbie!"

Desperately she pushed him deep into the cupboard and closed the door, smothering him in sudden darkness. Dub trudged into the other room. His heavy footsteps paused while he hung up his rifle, and then he was in the kitchen.

Corbie could almost feel Dub and Miz Alice measuring each other. So he held his breath until his lungs were bursting, fighting not to make a sound. When he had to breathe at last, loud and rasping, he knew Dub must have heard — must come and fling open the door.

"Where's my vittles?"

Through the closet door Corbie could hear Dub's britches rustle.

"I'm late," Alice said. "Boiling clothes all morning, I forgot the time of day."

"Well, git it now," Dub said.

Pots rattled as Miz Alice scurried

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about. The chair groaned when Dub sat down.

The knife, Corbie thought. He'll see the knife on the table. But maybe Miz Alice put it away.

But the silence was too long. Dub saw it, picked it up, opened the blade. Now he looked at Miz Alice, a question in his lifted brows. She busied herself, the pots and pans rattling.

"What's this?" Dub asked.

Her answer was ready. "A knife. My daddy gave it to me before he died. It — it was the last thing he gave me."

Dub grunted. *Click*, the blade snapped open. *Click*, it closed.

In the closet Corbie squatted in a cramped half-crouch beneath a shelf, his legs aching. He had to move. Carefully he reached out to lean against the wall beside the door and, off balance, tumbled forward with a thud. He lay rigid, breathless, waiting.

Dub heard. He must have heard.

Dub said, "I never seen it afore. How come?"

"I had it packed in my clothes," Alice said. "I never found it till today."

Click, click. Dub opened and closed the knife. Corbie could see the pale gray eyes staring at Miz Alice, not believing.

"I seen you unpack yore bag. Warn't no knife there."

"It was in a pocket," Alice said, spooning up the mush. "In an apron."

"You didn't have no apron!"

Her feet shuffled on the boards as she faced him. "Don't you ever believe me, Dub? This morning you said I was married before, that I left a man across the mountains. No matter what I say, you don't believe me!"

A long silence. The chair moved again when Dub pushed himself erect. He walked to the window-shelf, looking. He saw the milk in the open jug on the sideboard.

Click.

Dub grunted. "You didn't finish breakfast dishes."

"I wanted to do the clothes in the cool of the day. I told you."

"You're lyin'. You was cleanin' up breakfast when I left."

"I didn't finish!"

Now Dub studied the cups that Corbie and Miz Alice had used. He turned them around and around, his eyes gleaming. "I didn't drink out of one of these cups. Cup I drunk from was cracked on the lip. I'll show you."

Before she could stop him, he moved to the cupboard and flung open the door.

From low inside, Corbie watched Dub's huge hand grab a cup from the second shelf. He was angry now. Corbie could hear Dub's heavy breathing. The hand came back again, found another cup. Then the cupboard door slammed shut.

"Here!" Dub said. "You did wash my cup this mornin'. Somebody else drunk from that cup. You've had company, gal — us not married three weeks and company already! Who?"

"All right, I'll tell you. One of the ladies from The Notch."

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"Who?" his voice stalked her.

"Miz Tom Meredith."

She's lyin' to keep him from scarin' me, Corbie thought.

"Seems I seen Tom and Miz Meredith headin' for the junction not an hour ago," Dub said at last. "I seen 'em rattlin' down the trace in their old high-top buggy."

"Eat your dinner," sighed Miz Alice.

Dub attacked the meal, and there was only the sound of his eating and the occasional chortle of a rain crow calling down the hill. At last Dub shuffled at the table, tapped his pipe on a chair leg, stuffed it with burley, lit it, and began to puff in long rasping draws.

"Now," Dub said. "Tell me about yore visitor."

"You wouldn't believe me, Dub."

Dub pulled hard on the squeaky pipe. "Who was he?"

"See, you think it's a man. You always think the wrong things, the mean things — about me and everybody!"

"He left his knife," Dub said. *Click*. "A good un, too. Why'd he leave his knife?"

"All right, I'll tell you," she said, defeated; and Corbie prayed. "It was little Corbie McDonald, your own nephew. Now are you satisfied?"

Dub played with the knife while Miz Alice cleaned the table. Then the chair groaned and scraped, and Dub stomped into the front room to get his rifle. He returned and leaned against the back door-frame.

"I don't believe you," he said. Corbie heard him step into the yard, heard the hound whimper a welcome.

Miz Alice opened the cupboard door. "You can come out now, Corbie." There was no life in her voice or face. He staggered out, one foot numb. "You must go now, Corbie darling."

"You told him I was here," Corbie said, accusing.

"I had to, Corbie — he made me!"

"Why didn't you tell him I was in the closet, then?"

Her half-wild eyes searched for an answer. "Oh, I don't know. I don't know nothing about that man! I was afraid he'd scare you, I guess, or hurt you." She squeezed him in an agony of indecision. "I was afraid he'd tell you to stay away, and I love you, Corbie. Love you like my own —"

Numbly he nodded, knowing what she meant, knowing how she felt because he felt it too. But he could not say it. Those were words he'd never used before. Instead he asked, "Can I come back again?"

"No, Corbie. Not here." Her tone was quiet, final.

"I ain't afraid of him. I hate him, hate him!"

But she would not relent. Gently she pushed him toward the door, trying to shield him from her anguish. "I'll see you again, I promise. But please go now. And . . . goodbye, Corbie."

She closed the door on him, almost slamming it, and he was alone in the yard.

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Late that evening he descended to the creek and lay belly-down on the bridge, watching his reflection in the stream. Idly he dropped a stone through his image and saw it twist in grotesque watery shapes, then shimmer together again. Then another reflection appeared above his own — a big hat with a wide brim, looking down.

Corbie thought: He knows now. She told him, I bet. Miz Alice told him about me bein' in the cupboard, and he's come to git me.

Still as a turtle, he waited. Dub stooped over him, bending so low that Corbie felt Dub's breath brush the hairs of his neck.

The watery image froze in a straight-mouthed grin with only Dub's eyes crinkling at the corners. He knew Dub was trying to scare him.

Corbie wheeled in sudden fury. "What do you want!"

Dub's dark face retreated in surprise. He straightened, tall as a tree, and for the first time Corbie saw the knife open in his hand.

Dub said, "I want to ask you suthin', boy."

"Well, ask me!"

Dub held out his palm and revealed the knife. "Is this yore'n, boy? Answer me right, now."

It's a trick, Corbie thought. Dub's always trickin' people, like he did Miz Alice when I was in the closet. Well, he won't trick me!

"Naw," he said, and met Dub's stare head-on.

The man's face beamed triumph. "You positive?"

Corbie nodded.

Dub turned and clomped off the bridge, each bit step echoing over the water. The boy sat up and watched the coat flopping up the trail; Dub's hand was a fist around the knife. Then Dub broke into a long-legged lope. Corbie had never seen him run before. A dark thought chilled him.

Troubled, he dropped more stones into the shaded water. Then, minutes later, he looked up the trail at some imagined cry, probing the shadowed nothingness of the hill. The sound was not repeated.

Lisette said behind him, "Corbie! I've been calling you for an hour!"

He turned hopefully. Lisette had called; he had heard Lisette. But he had to be sure. "What did you say, Maw? How did you call?"

She laughed, indulging him. "Like I always do. I said 'Corbie, Corbie boy!' Why?"

He shook his head. "I can't rightly tell. I heard somethin' like a scream. Up to Miz Alice's."

Her arms enclosed him, humoring him until she felt his trembling. "My, you are scared. You can hear a million sounds in the woods. The locusts, the katydids, water running. I used to get scared every night of the world!"

"It was Miz Alice, I tell you. Miz Alice!"

"Now why would Miz Alice scream, Corbie? Dub's home by now. He'll watch out for her."

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"Take me up there," he pleaded. "I want to see Miz Alice, Maw."

She led him firmly back to the house, fed him supper, supervised his footwashing, and rushed him to bed.

In the warm darkness upstairs Corbie hurried to the window, listening. He had heard every murmur countless times before, but none so sharply as now; the normal voices of darkness magnified the stillness between. He strained his ears, reaching out to the cabin on the other hill, praying for a sound. Once, just after his first visit, he had heard Miz Alice singing. Once he had heard her shout the cow into the stall, and once he had heard her laughing. He would always remember the night he heard her laughing.

His eyes began to mist with sleep, and he surrendered to the bed. But he left the window open wide, just in case.

What awakened him he did not know. He sat up shivering in the predawn chill, and reached to pull the covers over him. The thought of Miz Alice stopped his hand. Outside the first tint of day barely limned the cloud-tops, but it was still black-dark on the ground. He must go to Miz Alice. In the darkness he found his shirt and jeans and slipped down the ladder. His hand was on the door when his father stopped him:

"Corbie, where you goin'?"

"Outside. I couldn't sleep, Paw."

"Oh. See you hurry back."

Now the sky was all smoky gray with streaks of pearl in the east. He walked as fast as he dared, until even Bart's keen ears could not hear. Then he pounded down the tree-tunneled blackness, across the bridge, up the long steep trail.

Far through the trees he saw the light in Dub's cabin window. Moving upwind, he scouted the yard looking for the hound. He dropped on hands and knees and wriggled up almost to the stoop. There he found the tether lying loose. The hound was gone, and Dub with her, no doubt.

A sudden fear assailed him. He spun in a crouch, scanning the darkness until satisfied he was alone. Then he crept along the cabin wall until he stood beneath the window. Inside a candle guttered. Again he jumped to look into the room, to see the bed.

It had not been slept in. Miz Alice wasn't there.

He backed away to the middle of the yard. There he stretched on tiptoe and studied the room for some sign of her. There was the shelf with her Bible and two other books, the candle beside them. Beside the chest was the bed. Only the candle lived in the room, its flame gasping.

And then there was the sound.

It came from far away, and as he wondered wildly where Miz Alice could be, it barely touched his senses. Like a clock's tick, it slowly etched its way into his consciousness, unheard until noticed, then filling the void with sound.

Hanh — thump . . . *Hanh* — thump . . . *Hanh* — thump . . .

From the far hollow beyond the

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cabin it rode the night air in a whisper of almost nothing-at-all. He held his breath to hear. And heard.

Oh, God, no. It can't be Dub a-diggin' on the edge of the hill — not down where he buried the first one. *No!*

He had to see. Even though his heart ran loose in his breast, he had to see. The dawn was full-gray now, and he must hurry before the light revealed him.

He slipped past the black pot where Miz Alice had boiled the morning's wash, past the well, and into the trees.

And the sound became truth.

First he saw the lantern, then Dub's face shining red with sweat as he worked in the dim light. Dub never missed a beat. Thump went the adze, *Hanh!* said Dub, thump went the adze. The hound lay beside the hole, dull eyes hooded as she dozed.

Keeping an oak trunk between him and the scene, Corbie moved forward. Behind the tree at last, he waited, afraid to look. Dub was only yards away now. Then, with slow and infinite patience, exposing only a quarter-inch of his head at a time, he looked again. Beside the hole lay something white. A sheet — a wrapped-up sheet, with something inside. Something big. He could not be sure what the sheet concealed. An intervening patch of brush confused his view.

He had to know. On all fours he crept so close he could hear Dub's little sniff before each blow. Then, as he knelt too long in one place, a dead twig cracked. The dog raised its head, and at last slouched down again. Corbie waited, then raised up to see.

As he stood there half-erect Dub suddenly lifted his eyes from the pit and fixed them squarely on the boy.

He can't see me, Corbie thought. It's still too dark for him to see.

Dub stopped his swing, adze hanging over his shoulder. Then he said, "Boy, come 'ere to me!"

The hound barked sharply, and Corbie ran. He ran blindly down the hill. Behind him the earth crashed with the furious sounds of Dub's pursuit, and he ran faster, his short legs seeming shorter with each step. Thorns grabbed his legs and tore at them, pulling, holding. If he could make the creek, he would dive. He'd find shelter in the roots under the bank.

Suddenly he plunged over a rise, fell, and rolled. He struggled erect to run again, but there was the dog in front of him, barking like a hellion. Wildly the boy twisted aside, stumbled, and fell again.

A strong hand grasped the back of his shirt, lifted and spun him to face Dub's gray, glittering eyes.

"How come you run, boy? How come?" asked Dub.

Corbie cringed, still breathless from the run. Dub jerked his face up close. "Answer me, boy!"

"I don't know!" Corbie said.

"What'd you see, boy? Tell me!"

"Nothin'. I didn't see nothin'." But his eyes could not lie, and he

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knew that Dub read the truth: *You killed her, Dub McDonald. Killed Miz Alice, Dub McDonald.*

"You're lyin', boy. Lyin'!"

"No, I swear!" Dub's fist was a steel band around his neck, squeezing. He shook the boy in fury.

"You saw, boy — didn't you?"

"I — I saw you diggin', that's all!" Corbie gasped.

"Why'd you come at this time of mornin', across the creek and up the dark trail, then?"

The boy pulled at the fingers around his throat, but Dub would not relent. "Let me down!" Corbie cried. "Let me down."

"Why'd you come?"

Desperately his mind reeled, searching for an answer. "To — to get my knife. The one I give Miz Alice!"

Dub dropped him to the ground.

Corbie lay there, looking up at him, watching his expression change to stark surprise.

"What did you say, boy?"

"I come to get my knife."

Comprehension struck Dub, and he staggered with the shock. His glazed eyes looked through the boy and into the enormity of what he had done. Shaking, he reached into his pocket and pulled forth the knife.

"This is yore knife," he whispered. "You give it to her?"

Corbie nodded.

Dub licked his quivering lips and murmured words without reason, praying forgiveness and swearing retribution in a breath. His anger flared into madness, and he suddenly shouted at Corbie, "You lied to me. Today at the bridge, you lied!"

Corbie lay where he had fallen while rage stiffened Dub's tall slack frame.

"You lied to me, and I killed her for it!"

Dub picked up the adze where he had dropped it and raised it high. Corbie watched impersonally, feeling that this was happening to someone else, not caring any more. He waited, his eyes on the blade.

But the adze did not come down. It hung in midair for seconds, until the boy glanced at Dub's face. Dub stared beyond Corbie, and Corbie turned to find Bart's lean silhouette against the morning light, his Kentucky aimed straight at Dub's huge head.

Then the heavy tool dropped to the ground, and Dub with it, sobbing; and on his knees all Dub could say through his tears was, "He lied to me, Bart. Yore boy lied to me, and I killed her for it!"

Before noon the sheriff came. Unfeeling, Corbie stood in the yard and watched them take Dub down the trace in a black buggy drawn by a roan mare. Dub's face was streaked with tears, and Corbie heard him explaining to the sheriff once again, "He lied to me. The boy lied to me about the knife, and I killed her for it. He lied to me!"

Suddenly Corbie felt the hardness of the knife in his pocket, took it out, and looked at it. Then he flung it with all his strength into the woods behind the house.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ELLERY QUEEN**

TITLE: ***Cut, Cut, Cut!***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Ellery Queen, mystery writer, and his father, Inspector Queen

LOCALE: New York City

COMMENTS: *The 38 myna birds from southern India may have been eyewitnesses to a brutal murder, and one of them may be the only bird detective on record.*

FRIENDS OF THE FEATHERED WORLD will have no trouble recalling the case of old Mrs. Andrus, who left a million dollars to 38 myna birds. What is not generally known, even among bird lovers, is that Ellery was in that case up to his pectorals, taking wing on as pretty a flight of reasoning as his casebook attests.

With the assistance, be it noted, of the only bird-detective on record.

Mrs. Andrus was a lonely old lady who had outlived family and friends, and whom an aging body had condemned to a wheel chair. Her only human connections were her doctor, her lawyer, and her paid companion. But Dr. Cooke was a bloated man with a sort of decayed charm, like an overripe banana; Attorney De Rose, whom the doctor had recommended to manage Mrs. Andrus's affairs when she became too infirm to manage them herself, was a sporty fellow with a perpetual tan and a voice that hurt the old lady's ears; and her companion, Miss Baggott, also introduced by Dr. Cooke, was a frozen-faced female of doubtful gentility whom Mrs. Andrus tolerated only because the woman tended the birds devotedly. And so the mynas, which had begun as a hobby, became the reason for what was left of the old lady's life.

They were true talking mynas from southern India — pert, hoppy little creatures amusingly yellow-wattled, with iridescent black wings and bass voices. Some of them had vocabularies of almost a hundred words. Mrs. Andrus found them a great comfort — far more satisfactory companions, she thought, than Miss Bag-

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gott. Her dependents, she called them; and, quite as if they were, the old lady worried over their fate when she should be gone.

From this it was a logical step to securing their future. Mrs. Andrus directed Attorney De Rose immediately to place the bulk of her property into a fund earmarked for her birds' support, maintenance, and loving care. Mr. De Rose and Dr. Cooke consented to administer the fund, and Miss Baggott was specified as permanent curator. When the last myna should have passed away, the fund was to be administered for the benefit of designated charities.

In the interim Mrs. Andrus asked little for herself. The attorney paid her bills, she and the mynas were company for each other, and she was content.

Her pets' one failing, Mrs. Andrus sometimes felt, was their inability to play contract bridge, the only other interest of her declining years. For this diversion she had to depend on Dr. Cooke and Mr. De Rose, with Miss Baggott making the fourth. On such evenings as the gentlemen could spare for her entertainment, the old lady would be ensconced in her wheel chair at the bridge table, playing a remarkably shrewd game for a tenth of a cent a point. Her bridge nights completed her happiness.

But on the last night of her life, Mrs. Andrus was not happy. Her usually pleasant face, as she wheeled herself into her living room, was positively menacing. Miss Baggott, who had set up the bridge table and chairs, glanced quickly at the physician and the lawyer.

"Nothing wrong, I hope, Mrs. Andrus?" asked Dr. Cooke genially, waving his cigar. "We're not feeling that nasty pain again tonight, are we?"

"It's nothing a grand slam won't cure — eh, Mrs. Andrus?" roared De Rose. "Well, well, the usual partners?"

"The game," said Mrs. Andrus, not stirring from her doorway, "is over." Behind her, in the bedroom, 38 pairs of unwinking eyes looked on attentively.

"Over?" Miss Baggott half-rose.

Hello, funnyface! said a bass voice suddenly from somewhere behind Mrs. Andrus.

"Hush, Minnie," said the old lady, without turning. "You thought I was asleep at my naptime today, Miss Baggott, but you were quite mistaken. I overheard what you said on the phone to Mr. De Rose and Dr. Cooke. Don't you trust your confederates, Miss Baggott? Or have they been cheating their own kind, too?"

"Confederates? Cheating?" said Attorney De Rose heartily.

"I'm sure I don't know what you think you overheard, Mrs. Andrus—" began Dr. Cooke with a smile.

"I overheard enough, Doctor, to realize why you brought Mr. De Rose and Miss Baggott into my life. I'm being systematically robbed by the three of you. I've been an old

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fool, but not any more! First," said the old lady in the same hard voice, "you're to put back what you've taken. You have ten minutes to give me an accounting of the stolen funds."

"Ten minutes?" said the doctor incredulously.

"Ten minutes, Dr. Cooke. Then we'll go on from there."

Say ah! said another bass voice.

Mrs. Andrus backed her wheel chair swiftly into her bedroom and slammed the door.

The three at the card table were silent for some time. Then Dr. Cooke said pleasantly, "Well, Baggie, you messed it up. Suppose you fix it."

"That's right, blame me," shrilled Miss Baggott. "I warned you two not to be so greedy — to wait till she kicked off! Put the money back. Maybe she won't prosecute —"

"Academic," murmured the doctor. "The bookies have my share. And from the way you've been painting the town, De Rose, I gather you're in the same stable. Any suggestions from our legal department?"

The lawyer extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray before him with a brutal thumb; under his tan he was livid. "The way I've fixed it, we could go on working this gold mine for years. Who'd squawk — the birds?"

"There's an old bird in that bedroom who's going to squawk. To the D.A.!" said Miss Baggott venomously.

"And suppose she doesn't."

"What?"

"Suppose she doesn't," said the lawyer, squeezing the deck of cards. "Suppose tonight we had to cut our bridge game short because, say, Miss Baggott wasn't feeling well. And suppose Dr. Cooke gave her some sleeping pills, and Miss Baggott retired to her room and went out like a light, and the doctor and Mr. De Rose left. And suppose, as soon as they were gone, that slippery apartment burglar who's been working the West Side lately broke in here. And suppose," said the lawyer, looking up at them, "suppose the old woman surprised him and he lost his stupid head. And suppose, since he's known to carry a knife —"

"No," whispered Miss Baggott. "No."

"Yes," mocked the lawyer. "Unless you want to go to jail for ten years. I don't. Do you, Doctor?"

"Your diagnosis," said Dr. Cooke slowly, "convinces me." Then he said quickly, "Let's agree on the *modus operandi* before she comes back . . ."

Ellery and Inspector Queen broke into the Andrus apartment 35 seconds too late. Ellery stopped in the living room to bend over the still bleeding body in the wheel chair while his father, pistol drawn, kicked open the bedroom door to be buffeted by a storm of black wings and bass bird-cries. But the Inspector beat his way through in time to catch Dr. Cooke, Attorney De Rose, and Miss Baggott all trying to pile through the same window to get to the fire escape.

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The interruption had come so suddenly on the heels of the murder that, while the knife had been wiped clean, there had been no time even to replace it in the kitchen drawer.

Later, when the assistant medical examiner wheeled the frail corpse into the bedroom for his examination, the myna birds swooped and hopped and chattered about the closed door as if they knew what had happened.

Cut! boomed one bird, a particularly large fellow. *Cut, cut!*

"Yes, Blackie, yes." Ellery picked him up and, stroking his throat feathers, faced the pale manacled trio with cold anger. "Whatever phony plant you three had in mind, it was doomed to failure before it was even hatched. Mrs. Andrus phoned me early this evening after sending Miss Baggott out on an errand. She told me all about what she'd found out today, and about calling you three together for a showdown tonight. I warned her not to show her hand till we got here, but apparently she was too outraged to wait. And you killed her."

Cut! said the myna bird again.

"Correction noted, birdie," rasped Inspector Queen. "Which one of you did the actual cutting?"

"You've got us all wrong, gentlemen." De Rose's lips were stiff. "The doctor and I arrived late, and Miss Baggott was just coming back from a walk. We all saw a masked man duck out the window. Then you pounded on the door, and we panicked —"

"You don't say, Counselor!"

"There must be some way of telling," mumbled Ellery, walking over to the bridge table. "They came here tonight for a bridge game —"

"Hold it, son." The assistant medical examiner was coming out of the bedroom. "Well, Prouty?"

"Three knife wounds, left chest." Dr. Prouty examined the silent trio with the enthusiasm of a funeral director. "No one wound sufficient to cause instant death, but at her age and condition they were cumulatively fatal. . . . What did he say?"

Cut, cut, cut! the big myna was squawking. He struggled, and Ellery let him go. The bird hopped onto the bridge table and began vindictively to peck at a card. After a moment he lost interest and flew off.

"He said 'Cut,' " said Dr. Prouty wonderingly. "Why, he must have been an eyewitness to the murder!" He went out, shaking his head.

"Thirty-eight eyewitnesses," said Ellery, gnawing a fingernail. "Maybe, Dad, we ought to question them."

"I'd almost settle for that," snapped the Inspector. "Only, as it happens, even they weren't here."

"They weren't?" frowned Ellery.

"Not in the living room here, where she got it. I guess you didn't notice. They flew in from the bedroom when I kicked the door open and grabbed these lice. . . . What's the matter with *you*?"

"But if Blackie wasn't on the scene of the crime, why does he keep saying 'Cut'?"

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"How should I know?" said the Inspector, exasperated. "It's one of the words he's picked up. Look, son—"

"No, Dad, wait." Then Ellery said softly, "You're right. It's one of the words he picked up because Mrs. Andrus was so fond of bridge . . . she told me herself she played cards with these people regularly. *The cards!*"

And a few minutes later Ellery rose from one of the three chairs at the bridge table, and his voice made Dr. Cooke, Attorney De Rose, and Miss Baggott even paler. "At one point tonight you three sat in these chairs — Mrs. Andrus would have had to use her wheel chair. What were you doing? These cards tell the story. The closed deck in the middle of the table contains forty-nine cards. The three other cards are distributed about the table — one at each of your seats, face up. The three of hearts. The king of spades. The nine of hearts."

"*They cut the cards*," said the Inspector. "Butchers. Cutting to see which one was going to stick the old lady!"

"This card setup, which you had no time to put away," growled Ellery, "even tells us who drew what. From the cigars in your breast pocket and that cold cigar butt in the ashtray beside the spade king, Dr. Cooke, it was you who drew the king of spades. The cigarette butt in the tray beside the nine of hearts indicates your seat, De Rose, because if it had been smoked by this woman it would be tipped with her lipstick. So you, Miss Baggott, drew the heart three."

"Three, nine, king," rapped the Inspector. "That does it!"

Ellery nodded. "It does indeed."

"It was the skunk who drew the high card, of course — the king of spades," said the Inspector. "*You, Cooke.*"

"No," said the doctor urgently.

"No," agreed Ellery. His father turned. "No one with medical training, dad, would stab three times in the area of the heart and fail to hit a vital spot. Dr. Cooke would have finished her in one surgical stroke."

"But Cooke drew the high card," protested the Inspector.

"Then they were cutting for loser, not winner," said Ellery. "So it wasn't the high card that drew the murder assignment, *it was low card.* And since we know De Rose drew the heart nine and you the heart three," he said to the rigid woman, "that lays this miserable killing right in your lap, Miss Baggott."

The big myna made a sudden landing on Miss Baggott's head. She cowered, shrieking.

Down one! rumbled the bird.

"Now that, Blackie, is your first mistake," said Ellery. "Under the laws of this state, it's going to be . . . down three!"

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THE HIGHER LEVEL

It is with great sadness that we bring you this short story by Christopher La Farge, for just as we were preparing "Three Cups of Tea" for the printer, word came that Christopher La Farge had died, at the age of 58, in a hospital in Providence, near his home in Saunderstown, Rhode Island. It meant the passing of a fine and sensitive man, whose artistic sensitivity was evident in everything he wrote and painted; for he was a fine poet and novelist, and a sensitive watercolorist.

The most touching personal memory we have of Christopher La Farge is that of a glowing few minutes which occurred just about ten years ago. We were sitting with Mr. La Farge in a gracious study in New York, talking of writers' affairs, when the telephone rang. The call was from Mr. La Farge's literary agent, informing him that his then-newest novel, THE SUDDEN GUEST, *had been selected, only a few minutes before, by the Book-of-the-Month Club. Of course, we congratulated Mr. La Farge, and we remember him saying, rather wistfully, that perhaps he would now build the tennis court he wanted so much. And when we wrote to Mr. La Farge ten years later, recalling those thrilling minutes, he replied: "How could I ever forget? One sat in a room and suddenly an awfully hopeful dream came true. Life doesn't hold many such moments." No, indeed — and Mr. La Farge did not mean the tennis court; we are not even sure he ever built it.*

Christopher La Farge was especially preoccupied with that rare literary form called "the novel in verse." He wrote three of them — HOXSIE SELLS HIS ACRES (*a "restrained tour de force, summing up old Rhode Island memories"*), EACH TO THE OTHER (*a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1939*), *and* BEAUTY FOR ASHES (*a contemporary love story set in a Rhode Island village*). *The author's purpose, he once made clear, was to arrive at a technique that would make of the novel written in poetry "a comprehensible form as interesting as the novel in prose and more moving." He was perhaps the world's foremost practitioner of this rare and difficult art form . . .*

Now, as to Mr. La Farge's short story: it was first published by Rex Stout who said of it, and most acutely: "In a way it is just another episode, but also it is the story of a man's life, all of it, in the span of a few pages."

When the author included the story in his volume of shorts titled

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ALL SORTS AND KINDS (1949), *he said in the book's Preface: "There are at least two levels of writing in the story 'Three Cups of Tea' and not all readers will follow, or wish to follow, both levels." This was so provocative a statement that we asked Mr. La Farge, shortly before his death, if he would care to amplify the remark for readers of EQMM. In a long letter Mr. La Farge generously explained his double intent, and we now quote from his letter: "I was thinking of the fact that most people read such a story primarily or only for its story, and if they find it is real to them, they almost unconsciously accept the characterization of such a man as Philip De Vries. But there are the other and rarer sorts of readers who interest themselves in characterization as the essential element of a story, and will pursue it in their imaginations, seeking to discover what sort of man this really was and why he did what he did in the way that he did."*

Now read the story and find out what Philip De Vries did and the way in which he did it. Then we will quote further from the author's letter, revealing more about the second level of writing which Mr. La Farge was subtly achieving . . .

THREE CUPS OF TEA

by CHRISTOPHER LA FARGE

THE LONG, STRAIGHT RUN, ON snowshoes, down to the road had been exhausting for so fat a man. Philip had crouched there behind some sagebrush, out of sight of the rare passing cars, until he had caught his breath. A man would certainly run, he thought, my goodness, he'd *fly* down!

The longer, meandering trip back, leaving snowshoe tracks as of one looking about, was easier even though it was uphill all the way. Anyone following those tracks now would surely assume that someone had climbed leisurely up the hill, had stopped there, had been somehow frightened or alarmed, and had then run like crazy downhill to the road and presumably to a waiting car, since the tracks ceased at the road's edge. So far, so good.

Standing now in his usual hiding place by the ledge, between the two spruces at the edge of the woods, Philip looked over the slope to the west of him. It fell in gentle undulations of white snow in sun, to the in-

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credible black gash that marked the gully of Cat Creek. On the far side, the slope rose from a fringe of dwarfed aspens for a thousand feet of treeless hill, every fold and hollow of its white surface now filled with the shade and the shadow of the late afternoon, as though one had poured melted lapis-lazuli into them and it had stained their sides, gathering to depths of color in their bottoms. Over the rim of the mountain the sky was a pale and intense blue.

By looking carefully, Philip could see the softened traces of Fortescue's old ski-tracks on the far slope, making exquisite descending curves over the contours.

"It was a light fall of snow last night," he said to himself. "These returned expatriates certainly can ski. I'm sorry for Mathilde Fortescue, though she is an awful fool." His watch said half-past three. "Half an hour," said Philip. "If Fortescue was coming at *all*, he would have been here by now. I'm lucky. But there certainly should be *some* rabbits."

The conditions now, he thought, are *perfect*, except for the rabbits. Well, there was no use trying to hurry in things like this. Gracious, you'd spoil *everything* if you got impatient. It was only February, after all, and Fortescue wouldn't possibly leave till the spring skiing was over. He felt the blood run up into his face and neck and he said to himself, "I couldn't *stand* it for so long. I couldn't wait till spring. It needs to be done now, now, now!" Then he drew a deep breath and he said to himself, "Patience, patience! We have been all over this before. It was *all* decided by the letter."

He tried to turn his thoughts then, but he couldn't help seeing the words of the letter that Kitty had left so carelessly in her dressing-gown pocket: ". . . *if your uncle is ill why not go to New York; I can leave for business there and Mathilde would stay here — with Philip! Here things are no longer safe. One cannot turn over in bed without a host of people knowing.*" A host of people know, thought Philip, that's the *terrible* thing. And again he adjured himself, saying, "Now, now, patience!" He consulted his watch again, thinking, I can give myself only five more minutes.

Looking at the slope across the creek, the blue of its shadows increasing now rapidly, the areas joining, flowing together imperceptibly, he thought, It's so *beautiful!* and it makes me think of the spring when the mertensia comes out in those *huge* patches and all the ground is blue. Or yellow with ranunculus, or pink with spring-beauty. Or all *three* of them. Spring is *gorgeous* in the Rockies, he thought, but it's no more beautiful than now, with the snow making blue shadows and the sky turning to gold. "A very pale gold, hardly fourteen karat," he said to himself, and giggled. Across the slope, emerging from one of the reddish ledges of rock that bordered one area of it, he saw a snowshoe rabbit crossing. "Well," he said, "isn't that too *wonderful!*"

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Very slowly he raised the rifle he was carrying, a high-powered .22, and got the telescopic sight on the rabbit. When the animal paused, he shot it skillfully and quickly, in the hindquarters. It kicked and kicked and pulled itself clumsily forward a few feet by its weak front paws, making a gash in the undisturbed surface of the snow. Then it began to scream.

"Oh, God!" said Philip, in a whisper. "I can't *stand* that."

He ejected the old shell carefully into his gloved hand and put the shell in his pocket. Then with equal skill and speed, he shot the screaming rabbit again. It kicked twice and lay still.

"It hadn't messed up the snow quite enough," said Philip. "But it's all I could *stand*." Even at this distance, it was easy to see the rabbit lying there on the slope. Philip looked at his watch. Gracious, he thought, I must hurry. Twenty minutes to four.

Turning quickly he walked down the hill, following his own tracks carefully, for perhaps a hundred yards. Then he turned again and sighted the gun at the rabbit. It lay now as though it was on a ridge, silhouetted against the more distant blue of the slope behind it. This is the place, he said. He ejected the used shell from his gun and he took the empty shell out of his pocket and tossed it on the snow, lightly, near the other one. Turning carefully, he set his snowshoes into the uphill tracks and came back to the ledge. He slipped off the lacings of the snowshoes, and stepped from them to the red, wind-bare rock at his side, leaning down again to pick up the snowshoes. Making his way slowly upward, always over the bare rock, he came to a miniature cave near the top of the ridge. Until one was immediately upon it, back of a huge clump of sagebrush, it was quite invisible. From the cave he pulled out a canvas gun scabbard and slipped the rifle into it. Then he stowed the scabbard and his snowshoes in the cave. Unless someone lay flat on his belly to peer inside, he could not have seen them.

Sticking in the snow against a pine tree were his skis, with his poles hung on them. These he took carefully, leaving only the thin slits in the snow to show where they had stood. Then he resumed his climb. As his head cleared the top of the rocky ridge, he paused and looked. Below him were the tracks of innumerable skis, the snow flattened and packed and scarred into sharp ridges that curved together and melted into patterns like watered silk in lamplight. No one was in sight. Scrambling quickly over the stone of the ridge, he jumped down, and put on his skis, snapping the spring catch of the harness onto the groove in each heel. As he stood up, he found he was breathless and sweating. The sky was a deep gold now, and the pines on either side of the grooved and winding run were black against the gold, and he saw the fresh snow pale on their flat branches.

Slowly and carefully, in a series of short turns, he skiied down the run. "It will be *awful*," he said to himself,

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"if I miss the bus. It will be just awful. But if I fall and *hurt* myself, it will be worse, now." Coming around a corner then he found himself suddenly on top of a class of twenty men and women, resting on their poles and listening to their instructor. Philip stopped himself, clumsily and with difficulty, but at that he almost knocked down one of the women.

"Ah," said the instructor, "what for you make always snowplow, Phil?"

Philip smiled at the woman and said in his high, light voice, "I'm *terribly* sorry." To the instructor he said, "It's all I *know*. It's just the only thing I can *do*, Siggy."

"No," said Siggy. "You make good stem turn. I have seen. You exhaust yourself making always snowplow, snowplow. So it is you come so slow. One hour you take to come from the lift to the bus. One hour. I know. A skier like you, you should do it five, six times. You do once, once."

"I *know*," said Philip, and he giggled. "I'm just an old slowpoke. But I stop and look and I rest and smoke. It's so *beautiful*."

"Always you do South Side Run, yes?" said Siggy.

"I know it," said Philip, "but the others *terrify* me." He smiled at the class. "I'm such a *coward*." Then he said, "I've got to go now. I've got *two* rehearsals when I get to the Châlet! Gracious! Goodbye." He started again down the gentle slope, swinging in short, awkward curves across it. Behind him he heard the class laughing. "I'm slow," said Philip to himself, "but gracious, I *get* there." At the bottom of the run was the bus, waiting by the roadside. He climbed into it, saying, "Good evening, George," and sat down to wait. Once again he felt horribly breathless. It would have been *awful* if I'd missed the bus, he thought. I've always been so *regular* in my habits. There were three people in the bus, a man and two women.

"I thought the new songs you did in the Café were frightfully clever last night, Mr. De Vries," said one of the women.

"Thank you," said Philip.

"Are you doing something special for Mrs. Fortescue's party at Ridge Cabin tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes," said Philip, "I *hope* so. You just *wait*."

"You alone or the band too?" asked the woman.

"Now don't you ask me any questions at *all*," said Philip. "You just wait and be *surprised*."

"Anyone up the run, Phil?" asked George, the driver.

"Yes," said Philip. "Siggy's class. Do you have to wait for them?"

"Sure do," said George.

"I'm going to be so *late*," said Philip.

"They work you awfully hard, don't they, Mr. De Vries?" said the woman. "Lessons, rehearsals, parties!"

"They run me ragged, just *ragged*," said Philip. Patting his stomach he said, "It's what keeps me so *thin*." The women and the man laughed.

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Outside the bus was the cheerful noise of Siggy's class arriving. George got out to help them put their skis in the racks on the bus. They came in and took their seats, brushing the crushed snow off their suits, stamping their feet and laughing. George climbed back in and started the engine. Just as he was about to close the door, a tall, handsome young man with dark hair and no ski-cap hopped in gracefully.

"Okay, driver," he said, "I just made it." He looked at the nearly full bus. There was a vacant seat opposite Philip and he walked to it. "Well, well," he said, "if it isn't old Pappy De Vries in person. Get down South Side safely, Philip? Pretty dangerous run." He sat down. Philip felt his heart beat very hard and irregularly and he was so breathless he couldn't speak, but he made himself smile. Some of the skiiers near them giggled. George started the bus for home.

"Yes, sir," said the tall man. "Watching Philip come down South Side is a thrill. Reminds me of Toni Matt or Friedl Pfeiffer." The whole bus laughed this time, and so did Philip, but from his teeth out. "He's wonderful with a ukelele," said the man.

A pretty young girl behind him said, "Well, *you* came down South Side too, Mr. Fortescue. And you're supposed to be a marvelous skiier."

"Thanks for the compliment," said Fortescue, "but I just did the last hundred yards of it. Came down the east side of Eagle Mountain and cut through the woods. Fine new snow, but too many aspens to crawl through. Won't do that again."

Philip drew a huge breath of relief, thinking, he did not come by Cat Creek today, then. Oh, that *was* lucky.

"You should not do this alone, Mr. Fortescue," said Siggy. "It is a dangerous business."

"Oh, hell," said Fortescue, "I like dangerous things. And dangerous women."

"But if you are hurt, alone, what comes?" said Siggy.

"I won't get hurt, but if I did, I leave tracks, don't I?" Fortescue said. "I can be traced."

"For us yet it makes a nice night," said Siggy. "With flashlights, maybe?"

"That's your funeral," said Fortescue.

"Or yours, no?" said Siggy. Everyone laughed.

Turning toward Philip again, Fortescue said, "I tried to get the beautiful Kitty to come out this morning, but she couldn't. She's asked us to tea."

"Really?" said Philip. He hoped the blood he felt congesting in his face and neck wouldn't show in the dim light of the bus.

"She's a wonderful skiier, your missus," said Fortescue.

"Mrs. De Vries is wonderful at lots of things," said the pretty young girl. Someone giggled, and the giggle was followed by a sudden silence. Fortescue turned his head and grinned at

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the girl. The driver switched on his headlights and they made brilliant the white banks of the oiled, black road in the dusk. I'm a laughing-stock, Philip thought, just a *common* laughing-stock. He thought of the rabbit, lying dead in the snow, and it comforted him till he remembered that it had screamed. So like a child screaming. It made him unhappy.

When the bus pulled up by the Châlet, he took his skis to his own cottage and left them in the rack in the vestibule. He stamped the snow off his boots, hung up his cap and his scarf and his gloves. Then he drew a deep breath and entered the little parlor. Sitting behind the tea-tray was Kitty, his wife, her blonde hair golden under the lamplight. My goodness, he thought, she *is* so beautiful. How can anyone *hurt* anyone so *terribly?* Aloud he said, "Hello, Kitty. Is tea ready?"

"Hello," she said. "Do you want it now, Phil, or will you wait? The Mountfords and Willi and that pretty little Carstairs girl are coming. And the Fortescues."

"I'll take it now," he said.

"Ah, *poor* Philip," she said. "Must you go out again?"

"Oh," he said, "there's that party for Mrs. Planer, and the boys are *there*, in the Café, and you know what will happen if I let Fred rehearse that new number. My goodness, it'll be a *shambles*."

"Let it," she said. "You work too hard."

"She's a dear old *soul*," said Philip. "Mrs. Planer is an old darling if she'd leave the brandy *alone*. I *couldn't* let her down."

His wife had poured his tea for him. Perched on the arm of the sofa, he drank it quickly and passed his cup for more. Kitty refilled his cup and he stirred it till it had cooled and then gulped it.

"Sandwiches?" she said.

"No," said Philip. "My goodness, I'm getting so *fat!* But I'd *love* more tea."

"Now, Philip," said Kitty, "you've had two cups."

"Oh, gracious," he said, "you're an absolute *tyrant*." He put down the cup on the tray.

"Uncle James is no better," Kitty said. "I had a letter."

Not moving at all, he said, "Oh, how *too* bad."

"I might have to go on to New York, next week."

"Oh?" he said.

"I may not have to go," she said. "It would be only for a few days, anyway. You wouldn't care, would you? Aunt Emmy will pay for the trip."

"I don't mind at *all*," he said, "but I'm *sure* you won't have to go." He rose. "So *long*," he said. "I'll be home at six-*thirty* if I'm *lucky*." He could see that she expected to be kissed goodbye, but he just waved at her and left. I'm a creature of habit, he thought, but I *couldn't* kiss her now. He left by the back porch, seeing Fortescue and his fat, rich wife going up the snowy path to the front door.

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Fortescue, he thought, *Fortescue!* The blood ran to his head till it sang and the throb of it hurt the drums of his ears and he felt slightly faint. He said to himself, "Patience, patience. Everything is going to be *all* right. I just won't think about that, not *one* little bit. I'd do something perfectly *horrible* with Mrs. Planer's number." The first stars were out brilliantly, brilliantly, and the snow mountains to the east were lavender and to the west were indigo . . .

From breakfast at 7:30, with the other employees, till 3, Philip worked so hard that he didn't have time to think. Deliberately he didn't leave for the lift on Eagle Mountain till after his usual hour. The attendant at the bottom of the lift said, "You're out late, Phil."

"I *know*," Philip said. "I'm just a *slave*."

"What kept you?"

"The stunts I'm fixing for Mrs. Fortescue's party at Ridge Cabin," he said.

"Big stuff?"

"*Terrific!*" said Philip.

Of the attendant at the top of the mountain he asked the time. "My watch has stopped," he said.

"It's 3:15," said the man. "You're late, Phil. Usually I can set my old watch by you."

"I *know*," said Philip. "I'm just a *slave* to duty." He put on his skis and began the descent toward South Side Run in his awkward snowplow turns. The sky was gray and the wind was in the southwest, a mild wind. It's going to snow, he thought.

When he reached the ledge of the red rock, he stopped and looked about him. There was no one in sight. This is the danger point, he thought. It's *awful*. It *terrifies* me. He slipped off his skis, put them over his shoulder and climbed up and over the ridge of the rock. From the western slope he looked back again. Still there was no one in sight. I'm so *lucky*, he thought. He followed a spine of the ledge downward to the little cave. There he placed his skis carefully in the same slits in the snow that he had made yesterday, got out his rifle. Then he took the snowshoes and stood behind the spruces.

Looking at the slope across Cat Creek, he could see the snowshoe rabbit very clearly. The snow was a wonderful gray-blue now, flat, without contours under the gray sky, and the soft marks of Fortescue's ski tracks appeared and disappeared in interrupted curves of white that turned to the invisible gray of all the snow. Now and again a huge snowflake fell from the sky. Against his blue jacket they showed clearly in complex and balanced patterns of crystallization. Watching the snow and the slow and separate flakes, and the rabbit on the far slope, Philip said to himself, "Let him come. Oh, that he should come soon, *soon!*" As he said this, he saw Fortescue coming, far off, only faintly visible against the grayness.

Watching him descend the mono-

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chrome slope, Philip thought, it's the poetry of motion. But how does he dare to go so fast? And going so fast, how can he be in control? Fortescue was making a series of long curves, the parabolas of an S, infinitely repeated. As he grew sharply and momentarily nearer, Philip could see the little cloud of snow powder that rose as he bent his knees and swayed to the curves, the drag of the inner pole sending its own puff of snow-smoke behind it. Down and up, curve and straighten and curve again. The *poetry* of motion, Philip repeated. And then, and suddenly, Fortescue saw the dead rabbit in the snow and he made a sharp, angular turn, snow flying about him, and he came to a stop with his back to Philip, and setting his poles firmly, he jumped, with infinite grace, to a full turn and he faced the rabbit and so, toward Philip. Then Philip, moving swiftly but without jerking, shot him once.

Fortescue's left hand started up toward his heart, but it never reached it, and he slumped down in one immediate and loose bundle on the snow beside the rabbit. Then Philip walked slowly out of his hiding place and he crossed Cat Creek and climbed to the dead man and the dead, stiff rabbit.

"Poor bunny," said Philip, and to Fortescue's body he said, "I am sorry I couldn't make you scream. Yes, *scream!*" Then he turned and ran, heavily, purposefully back to his hiding place. A man would certainly run, he thought, my gracious, he'd *fly*. At the ledge again he said, "From where the cartridge cases lie, it is all just a *terrible* accident. Yes, Fortescue, a regrettable, terrible accident. On the ridge is the bunny, over the ridge, the skiier. The lone skiier. The skiier who loved danger." Then he repeated yesterday's climb back to the cave, hiding gun and snowshoes, thinking, they will lie there a long time. Within five minutes from the death of Fortescue he was standing in his skis on the packed and frayed snow of the run cut into hollows and used turns. But as he looked at his watch now, five minutes to four, he was not breathless.

"If I miss that *bus!*" he said. "Oh, it would be *awful.*"

He began to ski down, slowly at first, in the awkward, short turns, then longer ones, faster and faster till finally he called out, "Schuss, schuss, *schuss!*" and he thought, if anyone *sees* me, and he bent his knees and his body forward and he straightened out his course, gathering momentum by the second, till the pines fled by him, green-black in the grayness, the moving pines, and his eyes watered and his heart beat with fear, and his knees ached and trembled and shook and terror came over him and he cried, "Oh, oh!" but still he went down, faster and faster, and there were the far lights of the bus and the slope flattened and grew flat and rose before him and he stopped, slowly, and he poled himself forward now thinking, That was a *terrible* experience, to schuss so *far*, but I've caught

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the bus. I've always been so *regular* in my habits.

The bus was crowded. Willi's class and Siggy's were in it. They were laughing and singing themes from operas and Philip sat down near the front of the bus, saying only, "Good evening, George."

"Thought I'd missed you," said George. "Anyone else up the slope?"

"Not a *soul*," said Philip. "I'm just the last, as *always*. Just *Dopey*, bringing up the rear."

From the back of the bus someone, a man, called out, "You'll be at the Fortescue's party of course, Mr. De Vries. Will your wife come too?"

"Oh, *yes*," said Philip. "She wouldn't *miss* it."

"I hope it'll be fun," said a middle-aged woman. "Have you done another of your wonderful things for it?"

"Hel*lo*, Mrs. Planer," he said. "I've *tried*. I always *try*."

"Something special, then?"

"Oh, yes, something special," said Philip.

When the bus got in, Mrs. Planer said to Philip, "Come and have a drink with us, Mr. De Vries. I've got some wonderful brandy."

"I *can't*," he said. "You're *sweet* to ask me. But I just *can't*. Kitty is waiting. I'd *love* to have a drink with you later, but when I get home *now*, I'm going to have *three* cups of tea. it's going to be such a party tonight. *Three* cups. My wife isn't going to be able to *hold* me." Everyone who heard him laughed and he left them, smiling, saying to himself, "*Three* cups of tea. One for myself, one for the rabbit, poor bunny, and one for Fortescue, who wouldn't scream."

We continue to quote from Mr. La Farge's letter to your Editors: "I hoped that such readers [the ones primarily interested in characterization] would discover for themselves the unstated facts about Philip De Vries — that he was a man with all the mannerisms and some of the outward habits of the homosexual, yet obviously was not one. If the readers pursued this further, they would wonder how Philip came by these outward mannerisms, and would then see that he belonged to the genus of man who is an artist and a good one and necessarily therefore an oversensitive being who, not quite bold enough or good enough to dare the high places, has turned the practice of his art to one he himself knows to be both lesser in value and essentially a commercialization of the talent that is yet the core of his existence; as though, not contentedly but reluctantly, one allowed intelligence to manifest itself as mere cleverness. [This is subtle characterization — but oh so true!]

"Would there not be for such a man a constant sense of frustration,

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of near failure? And is not this failure akin, in its avoidance of the difficulties, the dangers, the almost-terrors of exploiting a true talent truly, to that avoidance of final maturity, that clinging to the safety of childhood not yet committed to a full choice of the dangers of maturity and manhood?

"This is what I conceived Philip De Vries to be and it therefore seemed to me that Philip, not homosexual despite the outward manifestations, and profoundly in love with his beautiful wife, could not possibly support the conception of her infidelity with such a man as Fortescue who, however useless a character, was the undiluted male."

One cup of tea for the rabbit and another for the man "who wouldn't scream" . . .

FOR MYSTERY FANS — these swiftly paced mystery thrillers, all MERCURY PUBLICATIONS are now on sale at your newsstand:

MERCURY MYSTERY BOOK-MAGAZINE — "Epitaph for a Virgin" by Robert Arthur; a tough, original, book-length novel. Max London wasn't looking for trouble when he went to Dunn's gambling casino — it was just a matter of checking on some IOU's. When he left, Dunn was flat on the floor, there were $30,000 in IOU's on the table, and Dunn's girl was standing there with a look in her eye and nothing on from the waist up. Max had no time for her just then. He had stumbled on something that couldn't wait, something that made even the $30,000 small-change. But before he could do anything about it he was up to his ears in murder.

A JONATHAN PRESS MYSTERY — "The Man in the Green Hat" by Manning Coles. Abridged edition. "Fast action . . . grand scenery . . ." reports The Saturday Review.

A BESTSELLER MYSTERY — "Murder Makes an Entrance" by Clarence Budington Kelland. Abridged edition. ". . . Lively . . ." says the New York Times.

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Another Woolrich whizbang à la **Black Mask** *magazine . . .*

THE ICE PICK MURDERS

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

BAILEY AND HIS TEAM-MATE, HASTings, both came to a stop, looking down. Murder lay sprawled on the floor between the twin beds. Ben Allen was in an expensive lounging robe, over silk pajamas, the upper parts of both batiked with his own blood. The death-weapon protruded from his chest: the cylindrical wooden handle of an ordinary ten-cent ice pick, driven home through the heart with a terrific overhand impetus, judging by the depth to which it had penetrated.

"Sure, that's Our Friend, all right," Bailey remarked grimly. "He brings one of them with him each time — probably swipes them off some ice truck when the driver isn't looking. All this is part of his technique; wealthy suburban villa, terrace window he entered but left open. We'll probably find that same waffle-pattern sneaker-print down below somewhere, if the ground is soft enough."

He went over to the circular wall-safe lid that stood out into the room like a porthole on the wall opposite. "Come here and I'll show you a funny thing," he said to Hastings. "Look."

He was pointing to the wall on one side of the safe. The figures were so small and lightly-traced they were hardly visible until you got up close to them. "4-9-6-3," in a perpendicular column, in red pencil.

"Calmly jotted down the wall-safe combination. Probably forced it out of the victim at gun-point and scribbled it down so he wouldn't forget it, then cold-bloodedly took his ice pick and finished him off. That way there's no one left to furnish us with his description afterwards. *That's* why we've never been able to get him."

He drifted around the room, head inclined. He stooped suddenly, picked up a burnt match from a round, scorched spot in the nap of the rug, about the size of a half dollar. "Get this. This is a characteristic trademark of his. Never blows out his matches, lets them fall to the floor still lit and flicker out wherever they land."

He looked around some more, finally picked up a cigarette butt, showed it to the other. "Notice the flat chisel-shaped end on it? He pinches them out between his fingers. He's as good as a whole *modus operandi* file, all by himself. Full of peculiar 'professional' quirks; you can spot them on any job he's been on."

"What about prints?" asked Hastings.

"We've got them by the bushel off

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these various jobs, and they all check with each other. But the trouble is they don't check with anything on file. They can't be tied up, they seem to be dummies. The closest they came to matching any filed prints were with those of a murderer held at one time by Scotland Yard. Even then, they weren't absolutely identical. Only, they cabled us the guy had been hung in 1913."

"We've sure got a book on him." Hastings told off the various traits on his fingers. "Always throws down matches still lit and chars the rug. Always pinches out the butts he smokes between his fingers. Always jots down the numbers of the safe combination on the wall —"

"Not always on the numbers," said Bailey, "but he did it this time."

"O.K. But he always wears sneakers with a waffle-pattern on their soles. Always picks expensive homes, where the women are liable to have plenty of jewelry. Always comes in and goes out by the window. Always drives an ice pick into their hearts." Hastings shook his head disgustedly. "And with all that, we're still not able to nail him! I don't know what more we need."

"Plenty," said Bailey grimly. "We need an idea what he looks like, no matter how vague it is. Up to now, only the dead have seen him. He's a complete blank. You'd think he was a ghost!"

"It took more than a ghost to punch that ice pick home," commented his partner.

They had returned to the vicinity of the twin beds again. One had not been occupied, the other had. A cup that had contained some pale-brown liquid, but was now empty, stood on the nightstand between the two. "Where's the wife?" Bailey asked the cop at the door.

"At the hospital. We found her still asleep in the room when we got here. She must of slept straight through the night, with him dead on the floor."

Bailey frowned. "Some sound sleeper," he grunted. "Move number one is to have the lab take a crack at that cup standing there. If she was still 'asleep' when you got here, then who was it first found him?"

"Their driver."

"Well, here we go again, boys," Bailey said gloomily.

A natty-looking chauffeur was ushered in.

"Let's have it, Mac."

"I sleep in quarters over the garage. When I came over to the house at my usual time to get my orders for the day, Mr. Allen wasn't downstairs yet. I thought that was strange, because he always starts for town at that hour. I noticed Mrs. Allen had dropped her gold compact at the foot of the stairs, so I picked it up. I called up a couple of times, and after getting no answer, I went upstairs myself to find out what was the matter. When they still didn't answer my knock at their door, I looked in. Mrs. Allen was lying in a deep sleep in one of the beds, Mr. Allen was dead on the floor. I notified the police."

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Bailey just asked him three questions. "Where were they last night?"

"Spearhead Inn, that place up the river."

He turned to Hastings. "You take that. They may have been spotted from there."–Then he turned to the driver again. "Let's see that compact."

The chauffeur took it out of his pocket. It was gold, outlined in diamonds. Bailey flicked it open, studied it, snapped it shut again.

"What's Mrs. Allen's given name?"

"Arline."

"What coloring is she?"

"Blonde, fair-skinned."

"I'll see that Mrs. Allen gets this back." He pocketed it, thumbed the door.

Hastings looked surprised, as he saw the chauffeur go. "Did you get anything out of talking to him?"

"More than I put into it." Bailey touched the pocket where he was carrying the gold-and-diamond compact.

The laboratory report on the contents of the cup that Bailey had found beside Mrs. Allen's bed was waiting for him when he went back to Headquarters. It had held coffee, heavily dosed with a powerful sedative. Hastings came back with his own findings right after and immediately turned them over to Bailey.

"I found Mosconi, the manager at Spearhead Inn, very cooperative. He seems to be a decent sort, as those birds go. With his help, I got a little something. There were two men by themselves at a table in his place last night, same time the Allens were. Point one: he'd never seen them before, they were first-timers. Point two: no women with them, so they weren't there for a good time. Outside of those two facts, they weren't suspicious, minded their own business. I learned from the doorman they took a taxi back to town. I've located the driver, and found out he took them to a flat at 212 Wrigley Terrace, in the Heights section. I have their descriptions, and two men on their tails. They're ready for pulling whenever you want them."

"Any minute now," said Bailey.

"How'd you make out on Mrs. Allen's sound sleep?"

"Swell. I think it's finally going to get us the one thing we've needed so badly in all these ice-pick murders: someone who actually got a look at the Iceman in person."

"You mean Mrs. Allen was putting on an act, she wasn't really as sound asleep as she seemed?"

"Just the other way around, she was in a sounder sleep than she realized. Her husband gave her a sleeping powder."

"Then how could she have seen this Iceman?"

"Who said she was the one that saw him? This says there was another woman in the house at the time, right downstairs. And unless I'm very much mistaken *she* did." He was holding the gold-and-diamond compact. "Mrs. Allen's name is Arline and this is engraved *B to J*. Mrs. Allen is a blonde,

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fair-skinned, and this holds rachel powder, used by brunettes. Outside of all that, why should a husband give his wife sleeping powders anyway?"

"Sounds kind of low to me," grimaced Hastings.

"It may have been an emergency appointment. In any case, the fact remains that she was down there talking to him, or drinking with him, when he heard a noise upstairs and went up to see what it was. He never came down again."

"And you think she saw the Iceman, got a look at him without his knowing it?"

"She saw something that played hell with her formal goodbyes. Listen, when a woman leaves a house in such a hurry that she drops a gold-and-diamond compact worth anywhere up to a thousand dollars and never even misses it, or if she does, is too scared even to go back and pick it up, there can be only one reason. She's seen or heard a murder committed, but can't afford to call for help or let herself be found there, for the sake of her reputation."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know, only that her first name begins with a J. But Martier's jewelry store probably does, and is going to tell me. It was bought there, it has the firm's hallmark engraved on it, and nine chances to one they delivered it to her for him. Thank God for women that powder their noses!"

She was going to be indignant about it, even after she'd seen the badge. She was the brunette type, and the night she'd spent hadn't improved her looks any. She had horseshoes under her eyes from worry.

"Who sent you here? I don't know what you mean by coming here like this! What have I to do with the Homicide Squad?"

"An awful lot, from now on," Bailey told her drily.

"I demand that you get out of here!"

"Now listen, Miss Jane Davis, save your production numbers for your backers. I'm here on business, not to study rhetoric. Either you talk to me here, or you're coming down and talk to me at Headquarters, with a brigade of newspapermen sniffing around outside the door."

He hadn't known a face could get that white.

"Here, eh?" He closed the door after him. "Now, you were in Ben Allen's living-room about four this morn —"

"I don't know any Ben Allen," she whimpered.

"Your nose is shiny, better use this." He opened the compact and held it out to her. She couldn't get any whiter, so she just got limper. "So what's the use denying it? He didn't send these tokens around to perfect strangers —"

"Will you let me get a handkerchief, please? It's just inside." Her eyes were perfectly dry.

She went through an open doorway into an adjoining room. He tensed, buckled his knees a little, as though

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preparing to spring. She sobbed once, somewhere out of sight.

Suddenly he gave the spring, skidded through the doorway like a shot, flung himself across the room. The window hadn't made any noise going up, or else it had been open all the while. She had one leg dangling outside the sill already, the other bent under her across the top of it, and one arm was curved around the raised sash over her head, supporting her in transit. She lived on the eighteenth floor.

He got her around the waist and dragged her back into the room so roughly the outer edge of the sill kicked off one of her boudoir mules and sent it hurtling down where she'd wanted to go herself.

He slammed the window down. She didn't act up, go into any of the usual hysterics, just let him lead her passively back into the first room, holding her up by the waist. She was shuddering a little, that was all.

"I can't go through it, I can't face it. You don't know what it means to a woman — to have the whole town talking about her, to have her picture splashed across every paper —"

"All right," he said soothingly, "I'll make a deal with you. Suppose we see to it that your name doesn't enter into it, that the papers don't find out a thing —"

She looked at him with dazed hopefulness.

"In return for that," he went on, "you've got to come clean with us, do what you can to help us. Look, Miss Davis. I'm Homicide Squad, see? I'm not interested in your personal life. My chief purpose is to get this man. As you've probably heard or read, he's already murdered five other people, besides Allen, in a period of seventeen months. I'm not going to let anything stand in the way of putting the crusher on him. You can play it my way — tell us everything you can to help us — and in return we'll shield you from notoriety to the best of our ability. Or you can play it your way — clam up about it. In which case, I'll take you downtown with me, you'll be grilled until we get it out of you anyway, and all the ink-devils will know who it is we're grilling and why."

"And you really will do all you can to keep my name out of it?"

"You'll be Miss X, the unknown witness. That is, if you really have anything helpful to tell us."

She took a deep breath before she made the plunge. "I — I was, I was there in Ben's house when it happened. . . . Oh, we were crazy, the two of us, to do such a thing — we must have been! It — it wasn't as bad as it may sound, but it was bad enough. We were sitting down there, with the lights low, having a couple of glasses of champagne, by way of farewell. You see, he — they were going South for the next two months, and he was so tied up he told me he wouldn't have a chance to say goodbye. He phoned me this from the Spearhead Inn, earlier that night. Well, I was mad about him, and

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I knew the servants were all away, except the chauffeur — and I said, 'I'm coming up to say goodbye' and he took me up on it; he was that kind, impulsive, liked anything risky, whether it was horses or a love affair. He bet me a thousand dollars I wouldn't have the nerve. Said if I wanted it, I'd have to come up and get it. And he gave her something to make her sleep, and let me in."

"All right, you were there," Bailey said a little impatiently, "I'm not particularly interested in that part of it. Tell me what you know about the murder angle."

"We were sitting there in the half light downstairs, without a sound in the whole house around us, whispering low — when suddenly we heard a single muffled step on the ceiling right over our heads. Not even a step, a little squeak, where there was a flaw in the flooring maybe.

"I said, 'My God, your wife!' He whispered, 'It can't be, she's dead to the world. Wait a minute, I'll sneak up and take a peek in.' He tiptoed upstairs, and that was the last time I ever saw him alive. Well, I sat there waiting, and in a couple of minutes I heard a thud, as though somebody had fallen. I didn't dream it was Ben himself — I thought he was in some kind of a jam over her, found out he'd given her too much and she wasn't breathing any more or something like that, and in trying to rouse her, she'd fallen off the bed.

"I tiptoed up myself, to see if I could help him. The light from the keyhole of their room made a little ghost-keyhole on the wall opposite. And everything was so *quiet* in there, I didn't like it. If she was awake, I would have heard her talking to him. If she wasn't, why didn't he come back to me? It made me uneasy. Did you ever have a hunch something was wrong? Finally I bent down and did a thing I'd never done before. I put my eye against that keyhole and peeped through."

Bailey edged forward alertly at this point; you could almost see his ears standing up, like a retriever's.

"I saw Ben's leg sticking out between the two beds, on the floor. I had presence of mind enough not to scream, luckily. Too stunned, I guess. I could see her — part of her, under the covers in one of the beds — and she seemed all right. And then suddenly a man, a stranger, someone who didn't belong in there, got in front of the keyhole and stood there for a minute, with his back to me, lighting a cigarette. I was too paralyzed to move. He passed out of sight and the keyhole showed blank. I just crouched there petrified, afraid even the act of getting to my feet again would give me away. Then he came back in view again, just for a minute, and this time he was turned *toward* the keyhole."

Bailey slapped his knee with a sound like a firecracker. "Then you saw his face!"

"No, I didn't. He had a dark-blue silk handkerchief tied around it, from his nose down. All I could see was his eyes and brows and forehead."

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"Wait a minute, if he was smoking a cigarette, how could he have a handkerchief swathed around his face?"

"He was smoking *through* it. He'd cut a little round hole in it, where his mouth was, no bigger than a dime."

"Damn!" exhaled Bailey softly. "What else?"

"That's all. He moved on and I didn't see him any more. He must have been ready to go by that time. I heard a tiny little squeak from one of the window hinges in another minute or two that told me when he'd left. A long time afterwards, far off some place, I heard a car start up and drive away. I lost my head completely. All I knew was that if anyone came and found me there, I'd be finished for the rest of my life. I got out, and I don't remember how I got back to town, but I got back somehow."

"Well," said Bailey glumly, "I suppose half a loaf's better than no bread at all. All you really got of him, according to what you say, was a strip of skin three or four inches wide across the upper part of his face, taking in the eyes, brows, and forehead. Would you know those eyes, brows, and forehead if you saw them again?"

"Yes. But only if I saw them by themselves, like the first time, with a handkerchief under them cutting off the rest of the face."

He nodded. "We'll try to arrange it that way."

Hastings was waiting for him at Headquarters when he got back. "How'd the compact pay off?"

"In a pair of eyes, eyebrows, and a forehead. I'm ready to reel in our two suspects from the Spearhead Inn now."

He went out and took charge of pulling them in himself. He and the two men Hastings had left covering 212 Wrigley Terrace joined forces, went up, and crashed in without any warning. It was just an ordinary furnished flat. The two were in bed, and too surprised to offer any resistance. Their names, they said frightenedly, were Cowan and Eckman.

"All right, get your things on and get over there by the door!" he ordered harshly. "You're coming out of here with us."

An exhaustive search of the place failed to reveal anything incriminating, not so much as a pair of sneakers with waffle-pattern soles, much less any of the missing jewelry or implements for resetting it. He had hardly expected, however, to find a complete layout around here, for it had been too easy to trace them back here from the Inn in the first place. As for alibi, they had none of any consequence to offer; they claimed they had both retired immediately after returning from the Inn. They had only one another's corroboration, which didn't give it much weight as far as Bailey was concerned. There certainly would have been ample time for either one, or both, to leave the place again and ride out to the Allen house in time for the murder, since they had left the Inn a considerable time before the Allens.

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"If you went right to bed, what're you still doing in bed now?" he shot at them, digging down inside a lamp-base with his penknife.

"We're not used to that night-life stuff," one of them faltered. "We got up at our reg'lar hour, but we were all in, so we knocked off this afternoon and went back to bed again."

"You admit you were at the Inn, though?" he said, on the way back to Headquarters.

"Yes, but that's no crime. Two hard-working fellows are allowed to step out for a good time once in a blue moon, aren't they?"

"Good time? I've got witnesses to prove you didn't show any signs of having a good time. You were there for some other purpose."

"We can't help it if we look solemn, can we? We got that way in our line of work, and we can't shed it even on our night off."

"What line of work are you in?"

"The undertaking business."

Bailey took the two suspects back to the Allen house with him in one car, Hastings followed in another, one with drawn curtains, bringing the heavily veiled key-witness — or rather keyhole-witness — on whom they were pinning all their hopes. They were held in separate rooms under a police guard, while the two dicks went up ahead to the murder chamber to make their preparations for this new kind of line-up.

"Take a pencil and draw two guide-lines on the wall to limit the keyhole's range of perspective," Bailey instructed Hastings. "So we'll know just where to stand them, for her to get them in focus. I'll give you your soundings from the other side."

Hastings held a pencil to the wall, started to move it slowly along without tracing any mark. When it had traveled as far over as Bailey could follow it with his eye through the keyhole, he called through and Hastings stroked off an up-and-down boundary line. They repeated the process in the other direction and that gave them the keyhole's field of vision.

Bailey sent out for a large dark handkerchief, wide enough to tie around a man's face. When it had been obtained, the suspects were brought up and taken into the room, the door was closed, and without their knowledge, the witness was stationed on the other side of it, on a low stool.

Bailey went in to handle the suspects, Hastings stayed out there with her. They tried out Eckman, the shorter of the two, first. Bailey prepared the handkerchief, stepped up behind him, tied it around his face at cheekbone-level, then clapped his hat back on, making sure his hair was covered but his eyes weren't overshadowed. Then he led him over between the two faint guide-lines on the wall.

"Just stand there like that — nothing's going to happen to you. Look down toward the baseboard of the wall." That was to get the inclination of his neck into play, if it was any help to her. She had seen the first man

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lighting a cigarette while his back was turned.

Bailey stepped back a moment, waited. "Now turn around, face the other way. Don't look at me, look straight ahead."

He waited some more. Finally there was a curt rap on the door. He went over, opened it narrowly, and conferred with Hastings through it.

"No. His eyes are too squinty, too many crow's-feet at their corners. Another thing, the hairline on his neck is different, she says. The other one's was tapered, ending in a W. This one is a straight razor-line across. And finally, he's a little too tall. The keyhole cut him off at the eyebrows, no forehead at all."

Bailey went back, fastened the handkerchief on the other one, Cowan, who was obviously nervous and whose hands were shaking at the strangeness of the performance. It took longer this time. Finally, when the wait had become almost unbearable, Hastings' signal came on the door and Bailey went over to get the verdict.

"Not positive this time. About sixty-forty, negative. She thinks the first brows were a little bushier and closer together."

"All right, keep her on tap out there till she's sure one way or the other."

A cop interrupted at this point, said in a low voice to Bailey: "There's a guy named Mosconi downstairs wants to see you — or Hastings, either one of you."

"That's the roadhouse proprietor, isn't it? Not now, we're busy. Tell him to go down to Headquarters and wait for us there."

"He says he just come from there, they told him to look you fellows up out here with what he has to tell you. He says it's important."

"Okay, shoot him along. But bring him in through that other door so he don't get a look at Miss X."

Mosconi didn't look like a night club proprietor. In fact, it was hard to say what he did look like. A wealthy yachtsman out of flannels, maybe. He came in blowing his nose apologetically. "What brings me here is this, thoud I mide be of a little helb to you. After I had that talk with your partner today, something else come to me. There was another customer of mine, besides these two you got here, who was there last night sabe tibe the Allens were. He used to be a big-shot gambler down in Miami, and there's no telling —"

"Kind of putting yourself out to be helpful to us, aren't you?" interrupted Bailey drily.

"I want to preserve my resort's good name," protested Mosconi virtuously. "If the Allens were spotted from there, then all the more reason —" He sneezed explosively just then, hastily stepped farther over to get out of the draft of the terrace windows, raised his handkerchief to his face, covering himself nearly up to the eyes.

The door suddenly opened. Hastings was standing there, holding the

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shuddering form of Jane Davis against him with one arm around her waist. She stretched a trembling hand out, pointed it toward Mosconi. "*Him!*" she gasped. "He's the one! Now I *am* sure! The same man I saw in here last night! When he blew his nose I —"

Mosconi seemed the calmest person in the room, in the stunned, throbbing silence that followed. He finished putting his handkerchief away, looked from the girl to Bailey. He was the first one to speak. "What is she talking about?" he asked with detached curiosity. "What does she mean?"

Bailey motioned unnoticeably to the uniformed cop who was in the room with them, and the latter shifted over before the terrace windows and drew his gun. Hastings likewise drew his, over by the door, thrusting the girl out of sight behind him. The two earlier suspects retreated into a corner, looking on blankly without knowing what it was all about. Bailey moved up until he was eye-to-eye with Mosconi. He alone hadn't drawn a gun. "She saw the upper part of the face of the man who murdered Ben Allen in this very room last night, and she has just positively identified you as that man!"

Mosconi paled, as anyone would have. But he spoke with forced calmness, his eyes never wavered on the detective's face. "You don't mean you're going to do anything on the strength of such a — ?"

"Everything. You're coming down to Headquarters, and I'm booking you on suspicion of murder."

Mosconi didn't make any attempt to resist, or even draw back, as Bailey snapped a handcuff on him. All he said, with a peculiar faraway look, was: "You'll find, Detective Bailey, that you're making the biggest mistake of your career in doing this. And I'm afraid it'll be the last one you'll ever make, too."

"That's a risk I'll have to take," Bailey answered as he led him out with him.

"You don't look particularly worried." The name of Mosconi's mouthpiece was Livermore, and he was good. Not in the old-fashioned sense of the word, maybe, but in the sense of efficiency, cleverness.

"I'm not," snapped the prisoner. "Why should I be?"

"Well, after all —" Livermore gestured baffledly. "You're going to trial in another week, and it's not going to be a walk-away — even for me."

"Who said I was going to trial? Maybe you think I sent for you to talk over defense preparations! Well, if you've made any, you can throw them out the window. I told you from the beginning not to do a thing, just sit back and wait until I sent for you. And now I have."

"But listen, Mosconi, I can't go in there empty-handed at the last moment, start from scratch, and perform miracles —"

"You're not going in there at all. Listen, I've been expecting this for months, for years, and I've been ready for it. I didn't know it was coming up

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the exact day it did, maybe, but that doesn't matter, I was ready for it whenever it did come up. I made my preparations way ahead. There's not going to be any trial, you don't have to worry your head about defending me. All you do is look up a man named Larry Trippler. I'll tell you where you can reach him before you leave here today."

"Aren't you going to tell me anything more than that about it?"

Mosconi smiled. "I don't believe in giving anyone my full confidence, not even you, Livermore. That's leaving myself too wide open, if you ask me. But just for the sake of argument, let's take the case of this Iceman, whom I am accused of being. Didn't it ever strike you as strange that a man could be so stupid as to do the same things over and over each time? All that made it easier for the police. But did it ever occur to you that maybe it wasn't careless stupidity on his part, that maybe it was done purposely?"

"But what good would it do? What would he gain by it?"

Mosconi shrugged guilelessly. "Not being the Iceman myself, I really can't say. It's just a point to bear in mind. Now you go to this Larry Trippler —" He gestured vaguely. "Just go to him and buy yourself some cigars, and tell him 'Mosconi's trial opens tomorrow.' That's all."

"Just go to him and buy myself some cigars and tell him your trial opens tomorrow?" queried the lawyer, mystified.

"Yeah. The cigars are on me. To celebrate my release."

"But you haven't been released yet!"

"I will be."

Bailey felt good when he walked into Headquarters next day. The desk-sergeant and a cop lingering nearby gave him a peculiar stare as he went by. Bailey got a distinct impression they had been discussing him. He knocked, went into his lieutenant's office. A few of the other men in the division were already there. The way their heads all turned slowly to look at him, you'd think he was a stranger who had stumbled into the place by mistake. The atmosphere was that of a court-martial.

"Bailey," his lieutenant said finally, in a particularly caustic voice, "I want you to go to this address and look around."

He handed him a slip of paper. His tone became even more caustic. "Just look around, that's all. Then come back here — if you've got the nerve!"

"If I've got the nerve?" Bailey echoed, nonplussed. "What about Mosconi's trial? Won't I be wanted in the Criminal Court this morning?"

Acid dripped from every syllable of the lieutenant's answer. "There's not going to be any trial. It would save time and a lot of explanation if you'd go to this place I'm sending you and see things with your own eyes."

Bailey spun around on his heel and walked out without another word.

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It was another of those expensive-looking suburban villas, set in its own grounds. He went in and ran up the inner stairs. A division-man named Turner was coming down them. "You in charge here?" Bailey asked.

"That's right." There wasn't much fellowship in the answer.

"Then what does he want me to come over and look around for?"

"Maybe to learn a thing or two."

"Why, you — !" This time Bailey's face went white. He regained control of himself with an effort, went on up the rest of the way.

"That double-door on your left," the other man called after him with sarcastic helpfulness.

He flung it open, came to a dead stop on the threshold. His eyes dilated as they took in the details of the scene one by one. His mouth dropped slackly open, and drops of moisture came out under the roots of his hair.

A man lay dead across the bed, the slender handle of an ordinary ten-cent ice pick protruding directly above his heart. A wall-safe set into the far wall yawned open. On a small table directly under it he could make out, even from the doorway, an empty leather jewel-box, lid open and turned upside-down.

He took a dazed step forward into the room. His eye fell on something before him, and he quickly stooped — almost fell forward on his hands and knees, the movement was so awkward and abrupt. He picked up a match-stick, charred from end to end, from the middle of a round singed spot on the nap of the carpet, about the size of a silver dollar.

He straightened again, looked at the other detective, who had come up after him. "Keep looking," he said, "there's more to come."

Bailey stooped again, deeper in the room, picked up a half-smoked cigarette. The end was pinched-out, flat as a chisel.

Turner, the other dick, pointed remorselessly. "There's another one over there by the window. It was left there purposely for you to see. There's the imprint of a sneaker with a waffle-pattern on its sole in the turf under the window. The plaster-cast made from it fits the sneaker-print found under the Allens' window; same size, pattern worn-out in the same places, therefore the same shoe. The finger-print department has already developed the pictures taken in here. They check with the ones found in Ben Allen's bedroom, as well as in all the previous places. Which incidentally, as you know, never did check with Mosconi's own fingerprints."

Bailey let the two butts he had picked up roll limply out of his hand. "My God," he muttered hoarsely. "A carbon copy!"

"You and your Miss X!" the other dick sneered. "You've made monkeys out of the lot of us, made a laughing-stock out of the whole division. Mosconi's going to slap a damage suit for false arrest against the Department. And when it comes out — you know the papers and the public when they think the police have bungled any-

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thing. You're washed-up, Bailey! You may as well chew your badge and eat it right now!"

"Shut up!" Bailey yelled, whirling on him with sudden fury. "Get out of here!"

The other dick, taken by surprise, fell back a step before the unexpected onslaught. "Take it easy," he growled. "You can't do this, I've been assigned to this —"

Bailey actually drew his gun halfway out, a thing he had never done before to one of his fellow-operatives. "Get out of this room, I tell you, or I'll use this on you! I want time to think, and I can't with you howling in my ears!" He gave him a push dead-center to the chest, slammed the door almost across his nose, turned the key, and stayed in there with the corpse.

A resentful snarl sounded from the other side. "We'll hear what the lieut has to say about this!" Bailey paid no attention, stood there motionless with the flats of his hands pressed against the back of his skull.

Simple, ordinary psychology said this couldn't be so. The law of averages, or the law of probabilities, or whatever you wanted to call it. It was too exact a duplication to be natural. Things didn't happen that closely in real life. Therefore it was an artificial repetition, purposely planned to mislead them.

But believing that was one thing; proving it to others was another.

He picked up the cigarette stubs once more, studied them closely. He shook his head. Then the two or three charred matchsticks that lay about, in their halos of scorched carpet-fuzz. He shook his head again. He went slowly over to the safe and examined the denuded jewel-case. He shook his head some more. It was no use, it was hopeless.

He slammed the safe-lid back into its casing in baffled anger. The impact jarred it so that it clicked shut. He took a step away, then turned and went back to it again. After all, Turner was right; it wasn't his case, it was only fair to leave everything just the way he'd found it. He scanned the wall alongside it, to get the penciled numbers of the combination —

There weren't any.

The other dick was at the phone downstairs, complaining to the lieutenant, when he came careening down three steps at a time a minute later. "Better relieve him of duty, lieutenant. I think he's gone wacky. Not only drew on me, but locked himself in up there with the stiff —"

Bailey pulled the phone out of Turner's hands before he knew what had happened, and hung it up. "I just want a couple of things out of you, Teacher's Pet, and then you can go ahead with your snitching! Who's dead up there?"

"His name is Tony Driscoll," glowered the other dick.

"Any wife?"

"She was called out of town yesterday afternoon — her mother's ill or something."

"Then he was alone in the house

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when it happened? No witnesses as usual?"

"No. But get this, Bailey. I don't have to give out with any information to you. You're not working on the case at all."

"Maybe I'm not," Bailey replied, "but I'm still working on the case before. I was assigned to that one, and this is just a postscript to it. You can have this all to yourself, but when I finish up mine, this'll go with it — there won't be anything left for you to work on."

He left, drove back to the city, went straight to the jail where Mosconi had been kept all these months awaiting trial, and interviewed the warden in his office. "I want to see a record of what visitors Mosconi has had — especially within the last few weeks. You keep such a record, don't you?"

"Yes, sure, visitors have to sign before they're admitted."

He had scanned the roster but Mosconi's lawyer's name was the only one listed. He'd been to visit him as recently as three days before. And, it was noticeable, that was the only time he'd been near his client since the very beginning of his incarceration.

It was through the lawyer, then, that the contact had been made. Bailey had felt sure that must be the case even before he noted the lack of other visitors. No ordinary underworld contact would have been used to carry out a transaction like the one involved: *murder as an alibi for another murder.*

He was unable to locate Livermore at his office. That was only natural: the lawyer was at the Criminal Courts Building, up to his ears in the various legal moves required to free Mosconi. Bailey couldn't tackle him there, because he was only working on supposition, he had no proof; he wanted to get him alone, and try a little bluff. But, he had to admit to himself dubiously, it's a good detective that can outsmart a clever lawyer. He waited at Livermore's apartment, just the same, to try his hand at it.

The lawyer didn't return until well after dark. He was in good humor, apparently having succeeded in setting the wheels in motion that would release Mosconi. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" he asked with cheerful contempt.

Bailey had rehearsed every sentence, every phrase, to make sure of getting just the effect he wanted. "To what do you suppose? When a man makes himself an accessory to murder by playing the part of go-between, between one murderer already in custody and a second one still at large, doesn't he lay himself wide open?"

A disconcerted look shadowed Livermore's face, much to Bailey's satisfaction. An instant later the lawyer was his usual imperturbable self again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"But I do." Bailey gestured wearily. "What's the use of denying it, Mr. Livermore? What kind of fools do you take us for in the Police Department, anyway? Look, every place

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you've gone from the time you left Mosconi last Sunday, I've gone right behind you."

"You mean I've been tailed?" There was much less color in Livermore's face now.

"I don't mean anything else but that. You were watched when you contacted the party of the second part —"

Livermore's face was chalky now. He poured himself a drink from a decanter with a noticeably unsteady hand. But so far, Bailey hadn't got a single thing that he'd wanted out of him. He began to build up the effect. He took out a manacle and began to dangle it idly, as though he expected to use it in a few minutes.

A flicker of panic showed in the lawyer's eyes.

"And as I said in the beginning," Bailey went on, "by acting as go-between, you've turned yourself into an accessory. So I think it's your turn to come with me." He gave the handcuff an ominous little flip, started slowly to get to his feet.

Livermore's presence of mind crumbled away like aspirin in water as the dick took the first step toward him. "Now, wait a minute," he heaved frantically, "you're jumping at entirely the wrong conclusion. I was no go-between, I carried no message. I simply stopped in there to buy some cigars — my going there had nothing to do with Mosconi —"

"He said it had a lot to do with Mosconi," said Bailey grimly, mentally keeping his fingers crossed.

A six-year-old child shouldn't have fallen into a crude verbal trap like that, but Bailey had the lawyer off balance now. "Who — Trippler? He's a damn liar!" he yelled frightenedly.

So that was the name; Bailey was patting himself on the back. But there was one more thing he needed. "Do you really expect us to believe that? In the first place, just on the face of it, isn't it a little out of the way for a busy man like you to buy your cigars there?"

Livermore flared, "Listen, if I feel like buying my cigars on Meridian Lane or anywhere else, that's my own business! That's no proof of anyth —"

The handcuff had abruptly vanished. "Thanks," Bailey said derisively, "that's all I wanted to know." Before the stunned lawyer knew what was happening, he had Headquarters on the phone, paging his teammate Hastings.

"Listen, Haste, there's a cigar shop on Meridian Lane. Get there fast and keep it covered until I get there. I don't give a damn what the lieutenant has assigned you to! This is the payoff on the whole series of ice-pick murders, I tell you! If you don't want to cash in on it with me, that's up to you —"

Instead of hanging up, he yanked the telephone cord bodily out of the box. His eyes flicked to a mirror on the wall before him. "Don't try that or you'll get hurt!" he snapped. He spun around, drew, and fired all in one move. The mirror took the lawyer's bullet, and shattered into spokes of a

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wheel. Their two shots were fired so simultaneously, there was practically only one report. Livermore's gun nipped up out of his hand, he made a grab for his forearm, clutched it tightly, bit his underlip, and leaned slowly forward above the desk.

Bailey went over, picked up the gun, and pocketed it along with his own. "Told you you'd get hurt," he smiled grimly. "And whoever called you smart didn't know what they were talking about! It was like taking candy from a baby!" He turned around and ran out without wasting any more time on him.

Hastings was just a shadow in a doorway, across the street from a dingy little cigar shop below the sidewalk level, where an old man could be seen working away laboriously kneading tobacco.

"Anyone go in or leave since you got here?" Bailey asked him, materializing like a second shadow along the wall.

"No. What do we want from there?"

"We want a guy named Trippler, description unknown, location highly uncertain. Take the back, I'll handle it from this side. Can you get set in five minutes?"

"Four," muttered Hastings.

"Start."

Hastings sidled into the night. A moment later a highly indistinguishable blur crossed the street near the corner, vanished again in shadows on the other side, and then reappeared for an instant at the entrance of the house next door to the cigar shop and was finally swallowed up for good.

Bailey let two hundred and forty seconds tick off on his wrist, then struck out across the street in a straight line, clumped down the rickety basement steps, and into the place. The old man looked up, went ahead manipulating tobacco-fill without having to keep his eyes on his adept fingers.

Bailey lowered his voice confidentially. "I'd like to buy some real high-priced cigars."

"Just a minute, I call the boss," the old man said, equally confidential. He got up and slithered out through a doorless opening at the back covered by sacking.

Bailey drew his gun and pressed himself flat against the wall to one side of it. He wasn't giving anyone a free look. There was a short wait. Then the sacking stirred slightly and Bailey raised his gun. The old man came through and Bailey covered him, motioning him silently over to one side. The sudden tension in the old man's face, though, must have been read through the sacking. An ingot of yellow-red flame licked through the stuff, a gun exploded, and the front window of the shop dribbled away into nothingness. There was a sudden spat of hasty footfalls in flight along the basement passage beyond the sacking.

Bailey jumped in, scuffed the curtain aside, fired down the tunnel-like bore of gloom ahead. A second orange

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flash came back in answer, but the receding footsteps continued uninterrupted. A rear door grated open, there was a third shot, and then Hastings' voice sounded through from the backyard. "All right, Bail, I've got him. Right into my arms!"

Bailey turned and jumped up the basement steps to the street, after the fugitive old cigar maker. He brought him back in a matter of moments, a double handful of cigars clutched to his chest as though they were the most precious things imaginable.

They were. One of them slit open and crumbled as a test, revealed three blue-white diamonds, taken out of their settings and bedded in the tobacco, that was meant to be sold only to those in the know. Bailey looked at Hastings, with handcuffed Larry Trippler standing there sullenly beside him. "No wonder we were never able to turn up any of that ice until now! It seems to have all gone up — or at least, out — in smokes. If we keep this shop open for a while, as a decoy, I bet we'll round up the whole ring!"

The D. A. himself was present, at his own request, when Bailey made his report to the lieutenant.

"Mosconi, who was a roadhouse proprietor, and this Trippler, who was a former diamond-cutter from Antwerp before he went crooked, were partners. Murder, theft, and jewelry-fencing. Mosconi spotted the victims at that resort of his he ran for a front. Trippler attended to the business of taking the stones out of their settings, and cutting them up when they were too large to be safely disposed of. Hastings and I found a complete layout of stone-cutting tools in the back of that Meridian Lane shop. The actual commission of the crimes they alternated between them, so they'd each have something on the other; there'd be no danger of a doublecross if one was nabbed and one stayed out.

"The main thing is, they had this long-standing arrangement between them. All those little details of the charred matches, the pinched-out cigarettes, the sneaker-prints, the ice picks, and so forth were purposely planted at the scene of each murder. The idea was, if something went wrong and one of them was ever caught, the other was to go out while his partner was in custody awaiting trial, and reproduce one of those murders, complete with all the characteristic clues. Result: automatic dismissal of the murder charges against the first guy, and immunity from then on.

"They knew that the evidence against them would never be more than purely circumstantial. The fingerprints didn't belong to either one of them. They were etched on these."

He took out a pair of rubber gloves, turned them over to his superior. "Found them at the Meridian Lane place, concealed in some plumbing. We also turned up the famous waffle-pattern sneakers, hidden under a floorboard. For actual evidence, over and above all this, we have some of the Tony Driscoll jewelry intact — there

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wasn't time enough to remove it from its setting. That ought to convict Trippler of Tony Driscoll's murder, and leave Mosconi where he was, saddled with the blame for Ben Allen's. The credit for the rest they can split up between them any way they'd like."

The D. A. studied Bailey with unconcealed interest. "What was it first tipped you off that the duplicate murder was a fake, or rather that it had been committed by another person entirely, and therefore our reasons for holding Mosconi for the previous one were still valid?"

"That wasn't much, just a trifling thing," Bailey said. "Trippler happened to have an unusually good head for figures, Mosconi a terrible one."

"I don't get you."

"All those little details, the matches, the cigarettes, and the rest, were cooked up between them, premeditated, planted. But there was one touch that wasn't, that happened to be on the level. Mosconi was afraid of forgetting the numbers of the safe-combos each time, simple as they were; he jotted them down on the wall while he was getting them from the victims at gun-point. But because that wasn't part of the fake *modus operandi*, he wasn't aware of it himself, and forgot to warn Trippler to do likewise."

All the D. A. said to the lieutenant, as he got up to return to his own office and begin preparation of the case in which there were now two chief defendants instead of just one, was: "You've got a good man there. In case you ever happen not to need him, let me know."

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?

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

(*continued from page 34*)

rupted. "I thought you said she left the house before you saw him."

"She came here later," Dave said.

"When?"

"Last night about eight."

"What did she come here for?"

Again Katy broke into the dialogue. "Isabel came to pay back the five dollars Dave lent her."

"Did she tell you why she wanted to see Grover?"

"Sure," Dave said. "She had a letter to deliver to him."

Katy looked hard at Dave. He could practically feel her glance kicking him in the shins.

"Where's the letter now?" Kilkenny demanded.

"Where would it be?" Katy said quickly. "She couldn't deliver it because Grover was dead. She must still have it."

"I was talking to your husband, Mrs. Ward," Kilkenny said.

Dave shrugged. "It's anybody's guess. Katy's is as good as mine."

"How about guessing where I might find Isabel now," the detective said.

"I can't imagine," Dave said, "unless — Kenny, do you know a military character by the name of Leatherby? A lieutenant-colonel?"

"Him!" Kilkenny uttered the pronoun as if it were a nasty word. "I practically had to throw him out of Grover's place. He breezed in, right from Germany, even before the M.E. arrived. Practically blamed the police department because the guy he flew over to see was dead when he got here."

"Think he's a phony?"

"He's a jerk," Kilkenny said. "He tried to take over the show like it was the army's private murder. But he's no phony. I checked with Washington. How do you know about Leatherby?"

"He called on me. Wanted to know about my connections with Isabel. Maybe he knows where Isabel is."

"He doesn't. I just finished talking to him at the Exeter Towers. I got him out of bed, too. He wears silk pajamas."

"Tell me something, Kenny. How did you dope it out that I was in Grover's apartment?"

The detective laughed. "Next time you go to a murder, Ward," he said, "don't dress up in one of those jockey shirts."

"The old lady on the second floor?"

Kilkenny nodded. "She saw you climbing the stairs with a pretty blonde in a blue uniform."

"But how did you know the

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blonde's name was Isabel Connell and that she was bound for Grover's apartment?"

"Easy," the detective said. "I found La Connell's handbag in Grover's place, complete with identification papers and photo."

"But Isabel didn't have her bag when she went to the apartment. The bag was stolen."

"The bag was in Grover's apartment," Kilkenny insisted, "on the chair next to the telephone."

"Impossible. I sat in that chair and the bag wasn't — Of course, Schultig brought it with him. Then Schultig did snatch the bag."

"Don't talk like a six-year-old, Ward. How do you know Schultig and this dame didn't cook up the whole business between them, wrong number and all, as a cover? How do you know she didn't kill Grover herself?"

"Can't you trace the knife?" Dave asked.

"It's an ordinary kitchen knife. It belonged to the apartment."

"Do you know who lived there before Grover moved in?"

"Sure. A wholesale drug importer named Martin Sarassen. Mr. Sarassen is a married man whose legal residence is on Park Avenue. Since he never had his name on the bell or mail box at Eighty-third Street, I got my own ideas about what he used the walk-up for. Anyhow, he let Grover live there on account of they were old friends."

"Have you seen this man Sarassen?" Dave asked.

"I'm working on this case, ain't I?" The detective bridled. "Sure I've seen him."

"Is he short and plump and dark?" Dave asked.

"With a beaked nose like a vulture?" Katy added.

Kilkenny looked from husband to wife and back to husband. "Has he been calling on you, too?" he demanded.

"Never laid eyes on him," Dave said. "But Isabel says she was followed by a short, plump, dark man with a beaked nose."

"The gal sure has you eating out of her hand." The detective shook his head reprovingly.

"You're a nasty old cynic, Mr. Kilkenny," Kate declared. "Haven't you any faith at all in human nature?"

"I take my religion on faith," Kilkenny said, "but everything else has got to be facts."

"If you knew anything about women," Katy pursued, "you'd believe Isabel. She's a nice person."

"Maybe." Kilkenny put on his hat and stood up. "I'll see when I find her. Or if."

"By the way, Kenny," Dave said. "It seems they aren't taking off *The Affairs of Gwendolyn* after all. Can you use a couple of tickets?"

"Are you trying to bribe me, Ward?"

Katy snorted. "Tickets for *The Affair of Gwendolyn* can't be called bribery," she said. "Dave ought to pay you for seeing that show. It's mackerel in the moonlight."

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"I'll pick up the ducats after I've picked up the guy — or gal — who killed Grover," the detective said. "And speaking of ducats, does this ticket stub mean anything to you?"

Kilkenny opened his wallet and produced a pink fragment of cardboard on which was printed:

U.S.O. GALA
Lily Pons Concert
Festspielhaus * * Bad Grienenheim.*

"Nope." Dave shook his head. "Where did you get it?"

"Grover's kitchenette. Probably came from the murderer's pocket when he pulled out the handkerchief to hold the knife that killed Grover."

"Did you find the handkerchief?"

"It's no good to us — a khaki handkerchief you can buy in any PX anywhere in the world. It had Grover's blood on it but no laundry marks, no prints, no nothing."

"Anyway you found a stub. Kilkenny always gets his tickets. Bad Grienenheim's in Germany, isn't it?"

"Smart boy," Kilkenny said.

"What about Colonel Leatherby?"

"Leatherby wasn't in New York when Grover was killed. We checked the log of Leatherby's plane with Military Air Transport Service. The plane left Frankfort —" Kilkenny consulted his notebook "— at 2300 hours Tuesday and landed at Westover Field at 1630 hours on Wednesday. That's military talk for four thirty P.M. So Grover must have been dead half an hour before Leatherby landed, and he still had another hour by commercial airliner before he got to New York."

"Well, anyhow the U.S.O. ticket lets me out," Dave said. "I'm about the only one of your suspects who hasn't been in Germany recently."

"But you were in Eighty-third Street," the detective said grimly. "And you can't laugh that off — yet. Good night, Mrs. Ward. Night, Ward. See you in felony court."

When the detective had left, Dave put his arm around his wife. "Why did you hold out on the law, Katy?" he asked gently. "I thought we agreed to hand over the letter to the police?"

"I changed my mind," Katy said. "A woman's prerogative."

"But the letter doesn't involve Isabel. You read it yourself. And your woman's intuition told you that Isabel was okay. Remember?"

"Maybe the letter doesn't involve Isabel," Katy said, "but if that detective knew you'd been carrying it around in your pocket without turning it over to the police, it sure as heck would involve you."

"Katy! You mean you were actually thinking about me?"

Katy's eyes softened as she studied her husband's eager face.

"Maybe," she said slowly. "Or maybe I was just thinking about myself. I want to be sure you don't get yourself all snarled up again before I get aboard that plane . . . Dave! What are you doing with your typewriter at this time of night?"

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"I've got to write some new ads for Ben Smock."

"At four in the morning?"

"I may be in jail by noon," Dave said. He got into bed, propped his portable typewriter on his knees, and slipped some paper into the carriage.

"Dave, what do you think happened to Isabel?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"You don't believe that detective, do you? You don't think she ducked out of that midnight flight just to avoid the police?"

"Maybe."

"Nothing of the sort. Dave, that girl's in trouble — serious trouble."

"Katy, for once I agree with you. But there's nothing I can do. Kenny's on the job and he's a lot better at that sort of thing than I am."

Katy muttered something unintelligible which Dave judged to be either rude or insulting or both. He did not look at her, but he heard the springs murmur as she got into bed. He started typing:

Manhattan's Best Critics Are Unanimous
DON'T GO TO SEE THE AFFAIRS OF GWENDOLYN
'. . . uproariously bad.' — *Times*
'. . . smoking car humor.' — *Mirror*
'. . . excruciating.' — *Herald-Tribune*

Dave stopped to look at Katy. She seemed to be asleep. Probably just pretending — his portable was far from noiseless . . .

Katy was still asleep when Dave awoke at 10 o'clock. He bathed, shaved, and spent three minutes selecting a clean shirt — something suitable for a bewildered young man suspected of possible complicity in murder. He finally decided upon an inconspicuous little number of deep burgundy with a pearl-gray necktie to go with it. Then, leaving Katy still sleeping, he went out for a bite of breakfast and the newspapers on his way to the Lorimer Theatre.

He ate without tasting as he scanned the papers. There was nothing new on the Grover murder.

He was surprised to find Ben Smock already at his desk at 11 o'clock. The producer rarely arrived before noon.

"Wonderful!" Smock exclaimed, as he looked at Dave's copy. "Exactly what I wanted. Say, what's the matter, Dave? You don't look good."

"I'm okay. A little short on sleep, maybe."

The producer roared with laughter. "Celebrating, maybe," he said. "And why not? The ticket brokers are already buying four weeks ahead. So we'll take mail orders eight weeks ahead. Put that in the ads, Dave."

Dave sat down and began editing in pencil.

"Another thing, Dave. Hollywood is beginning to nibble. One studio wants to get in touch with the author. What do I tell them! I don't know anything about this Charles Cuadra. Who is he?"

"I told you he was a punk from the West Coast," Dave said. "They can find him through his agent."

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Smock shook his head. "He should come to New York. He should see his Broadway success with his own eyes."

"Why see it?" Dave said. "He can smell it as soon as he crosses the Rockies."

"Who was that old Roman character, Dave, who said royalty checks don't have no odor? And speaking of checks, here's yours. Don't spend it all on uranium stocks."

"Thanks," said Dave. He knew what he would do with the money. He would rent a car and drive Katy to the beach. Any beach. Or to a lake. Any place away from the city and Kilkenny and the Grover murder. He dialed his own number.

There was no answer.

The cold finger of premonition jabbed at the pit of Dave's stomach. He stood up.

"Any question about the copy, Ben," he said, "call me at home. I've got a headache."

"Sure, take it easy, Dave. I'll phone you."

Taxis were scarce, so Dave practically ran back to his apartment. He stopped twice to phone, but his number still did not answer. His burgundy shirt was dark with perspiration when he finally plunged his key into the lock. As he opened the door, he called, "Katy!"

Silence.

Both beds were unmade, which was not at all like Katy. She must have made a hurried departure. The bathroom door was open and there were towels on the floor. A half-drunk cup of coffee stood on the sink in the kitchenette.

Then Dave saw the note pinned to the back of the easy chair. He snatched at it and read:

Dear Dave: Isabel called. I recognized her voice and the fact that she is in trouble. I could practically see the tears on her cheeks. I could tell somebody was standing near her so she couldn't answer my questions. She wanted the letter, so I am taking it to her. After all, it's her letter. Yes, I know what you think, but don't swear. Sit down and take it easy. This weather is bad for your blood pressure.

Katy

Dave did sit down, but he also swore. Why did Katy have to stick her nose into this? And if she insisted on getting involved, why didn't she at least let him know where she was meeting Isabel, so he could cut the police in on the deal?

He picked up the phone and called Homicide West.

"Hello, Kenny. Don't you ever sleep?"

"Only in winter," Kilkenny said. "What's up?"

"Nothing. I was wondering if you located Isabel Connell?"

"Nope," the detective replied. "But I got another reason for thinking she's taking you for a ride. Her boy friend is missing."

"Jefferson Teller?"

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"Right — the weather man at Gander. The air line was going to bring him to New York so we could talk to him, but when they queried Gander they found Teller hadn't been seen since this morning."

"He's probably hitch-hiking to Idlewild," Dave said, "to join Isabel. She's still in New York. She phoned my wife this morning while I was out. Katy left a note saying she was going to meet her. But she didn't say where."

There was a sputtering in Dave's ear, a crackling of rich profanity.

"Don't be too hard on Katy," Dave interrupted. "It's the feminist in her. You saw how she was this morning. But I thought I'd tell you in advance that I'm going out to look for Katy — just in case any more corpses turn up in the neighborhood, next time I see you."

"What neighborhood?" Kilkenny barked.

"I thought I'd try Colonel Leatherby first."

"Skip it, Ward. Leatherby is in my office now."

"Another thing, Kenny. I checked with U.S.O. today and they told me Lily Pons gave just one concert in Bad Grienenheim. That was last Monday."

"I know that, Ward. All I want you to check are your rash impulses."

"So if you find that this guy Schultig was in Bad Grienenheim on Monday —"

"You stick to your own racket, Ward. Goodbye."

For five minutes Dave paced the one-room apartment like a caged lion — although he felt more like a mouse. He tried desperately to picture where Katy might be meeting Isabel. As a starting point, he thought back to the Eighty-third Street walk-up and the man kneeling in front of the bloody washbasin with an aspirin bottle in his hand.

An aspirin bottle!

Something clicked in Dave's mind. Aspirin . . . drug store . . . drug importer . . . Martin Sarassen . . . Wasn't the aspirin bottle the desperate attempt of a dying man to name his murderer, to point the finger of guilt at Martin Sarassen, the drug importer? After all, Sarassen, the plump little dark man with the beaked nose had followed Isabel. Perhaps he had finally laid hands on her. In that case, wouldn't Katy be going to Sarassen's apartment to meet Isabel?

Dave looked up Sarassen in the phone book. Ten minutes later he was rolling up Park Avenue in a taxi.

As Sarassen's address was on the west side of the avenue, the cab driver had to make a U-turn. He had swung into the intersection, waiting between segments of the dividing parkway for the lights to change, when Dave noted another taxi pulling up in front of Sarassen's apartment building. Even at a distance of 50 yards Dave recognized the man who was getting out: the tall, thin, close-cropped Carl Schultig.

By the time the lights had changed Schultig had disappeared.

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There was a floor indicator over the elevator door in the lobby, and Dave was watching the swinging needle as the resplendent doorman asked politely, "May I help you, sir?"

"I'm looking for Mr. Martin Sarassen."

"Mr. Sarassen? Fifteen."

"Thank you." Dave noted with satisfaction that the indicator needle had stopped at fifteen, and, after a brief pause, was swinging back.

"Mr. Sarassen's not home," announced the giantess in maid's uniform who opened the door. She glared at Dave from under amazing black eyebrows. One huge hand held the door a few inches ajar. When she spoke only her lower lip and her long jaw moved; her upper lip seemed anchored by a dark, hairy shadow.

"I'll come in and wait," Dave said. He leaned his shoulder against the door. As he outweighed the ogress by twenty pounds, he was sure the door would not be slammed in his face.

"Mr. Sarassen is not home."

"Perhaps he will be at home to me if you tell him I have important news from Bad Grienenheim. About Mr. Schultig and the Baron, tell him."

Dave spoke in a loud voice, hoping to be heard. His hopes were fulfilled almost instantly. A heavy oak door across the hallway suddenly opened and a short, plump, swart man appeared.

"Show the gentleman in, Ursula," the man ordered.

The Persian rug in the foyer was soft and thick beneath Dave's feet. The dark little man with purple lips and a nose shaped like a scimitar did not greet him, but made a silent gesture for Dave to enter a room filled with brass-filigree Cairene lamps, teakwood chairs inlaid with mother of pearl, and an immense desk of carved ebony. The walls were hung with red-and-gold damask.

The plump little man took up his station behind the desk. Dave noticed that his right hand was poised above a half-opened drawer.

"Sit down, Mr. Ward," said the man behind the desk. "I've been expecting you."

Dave showed no sign of surprise at being addressed by name. He said, "Thank you, Mr. Sarassen. I thought I'd better drop in to make sure my wife delivered the letter. She's still here, isn't she?"

"What letter?" asked Sarassen. His face was expressionless.

"Let's not lie to each other, Mr. Sarassen. After all, I'm in this thing almost as deep as you are. Didn't Schultig tell you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Sarassen coldly.

"Sorry." Dave stood up. His heart was beating so loudly that he was sure Sarassen could hear it. He was taking a long chance, but he was determined to bluff it through. He could think of no other way of finding out where Katy was except by pretending to be part of the conspiracy. He started for the door. "I thought

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you knew about my part in this. Obviously I'm wasting your time. And mine."

"Please sit down," Sarassen's voice had a sharp, jagged edge. "What letter are you talking about?"

"Please, Mr. Sarassen. You know very well that Miss Connell was to deliver a letter to Tom Grover yesterday. Grover was living in your hideaway in Eighty-third Street. You were waiting outside the place yesterday just before the police arrived, so you must have had some interest in the delivery of that letter. You and Schultig." Dave drew a deep breath before trying his next brash hypothesis. "So when Schultig had Isabel call me today to ask for the letter, I sent my wife with it because I'm being watched closely by the police. My wife is here, isn't she?"

Sarassen's purple lips twitched for an instant. Then he said languidly, "I've never seen your wife, Ward, and I don't know what you are talking about. I'm not sure I shouldn't toss you out."

"You won't have to," Dave said. "I'll leave quietly — without telling you about Grover and the aspirin bottle."

Sarassen's face did not change expression, but it changed color. It was suddenly the shade of damp sand.

"What aspirin bottle?" he demanded.

"The bottle Tom Grover had in his hand when his body was found."

"Tom had —? What was in the bottle?"

"Aspirin, I suppose."

"Pardon me a moment," Sarassen said. "I'll be right back."

Dave leaned back and lit a cigarette, feeling very pleased with himself.

He had his adversaries puzzled and on the run. He was getting somewhere. He fully expected Sarassen to return with Katy. He blew a perfect smoke ring . . .

Suddenly he sat up very straight in his fan-back chair. A familiar metallic sound destroyed his self-satisfaction. He sprang to his feet, turned the bronze handle of the door through which Sarassen had disappeared.

The door was locked.

There were two other doors in the damask-hung room. The first led to a gaudy purple-tiled bathroom, with no exit. The second opened into a closet which had been converted into a bar.

There was one window which led to a narrow balcony looking out on a courtyard. It was a casement window, with wire mesh imbedded in the heavy panes. The steel frames of the casement were fastened by a padlock.

Dave picked up the phone on Sarassen's desk. There was no dial tone.

He sat down limply. He was a prisoner.

His prison was comfortable enough, but the thought that his jailer was probably the man who had stuck a knife into Tom Grover was far from comforting . . .

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Katy Ward's many bracelets spoke in silver whispers as she paid off the taxi at Pennsylvania Station. They were nervous whispers, even though Katy appeared to be the calmest, coolest, crispest thing on sweltering Seventh Avenue. A tall, hatless figure in a white linen suit, she seemed entirely self-possessed as she walked through the midday dusk of the long arcade that led to the main concourse of the great rail terminal. But secretly her nerves jangled more harshly than her bracelets.

"Penn Station," Isabel Connell had said on the phone. "Go to Gate 17 where the next Washington train will leave in half an hour. Somebody will approach you and call you by name. You will give that person the envelope . . ."

"I'll give it to you, Isabel," Katy had said. "You'll be there, won't you?"

"I can't say for sure," Isabel had replied. "But whoever calls you by name at Gate 17, it's all right to give them the envelope, Katy. It's all right. You understand, don't you?"

Katy had understood, but she was not sure it was all right. It had been Isabel on the phone, but a frightened, taut Isabel. Isabel had been reciting, repeating by rote, while someone stood at her elbow, prompting, perhaps threatening. Well, there was only one thing to do. It was Isabel's envelope, and if she wanted it, she was certainly entitled to it — particularly as it would get Dave off the hook.

Katy had put the envelope in her bag, written a note for Dave, and gone out to hail a cab, a little breathless at her own temerity.

Pennsylvania Station, Gate 17 . . .

The photo-electric pixy guarding the train concourse magically swung open the door for Katy. The glass-roofed concourse was like a hothouse. The air was heavy with the smell of warm, damp humanity — humanity poised between two points in time and space, hurrying for newspapers, hovering over baggage, waiting; men with coats on their arms, shuffling toward the departure gates; fat women with children clinging to their skirts; slim women with husbands or lovers clinging to their lips; sailors with tired faces clinging to their seabags; businessmen without faces clinging to brief cases — all restless, all hurrying, all impatient to be somewhere else.

Katy saw the crowd clustered about Gate 17, waiting for admission to the lower level and the Washington train. She instinctively veered left toward the people waiting for the Pittsburgh train. She needed the anonymity of the wrong crowd while she waited — and watched.

She did not have long to watch. After a few minutes she saw a man circling the Washington gate, a man with a brisk, purposeful air, a man who was not waiting to go somewhere else. A flutter of panic seized Katy as she noted that the man was tall and thin, with strange glassy blue eyes and no lips. When the man raised his Panama hat to mop his perspiring

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brow, she saw that his graying hair was close-cropped.

Katy elbowed through the crowd in front of the Pittsburgh gate, edging away from the man with the glassy blue eyes. This was the very thing she had feared, the sort of thing she could not cope with alone. The man with the blue eyes, she was certain from the vivid *portrait parlé* she had built from the interchange between Dave and Isabel, was Carl Schultig, the passenger from Amsterdam who had snatched Isabel's handbag and then turned up at the scene of Grover's murder. She walked rapidly to the nearest phone booth and dailed Broadway 7-4476.

No answer.

She tried Ben Smock. Dave had just left.

Katy called police headquarters. She did not know exactly how to reach Detective Kilkenny, but after six cross references she heard his voice.

"Mr. Kilkenny, this is Katy Ward. Do you know where my husband is?"

"He's out looking for you. Are you with Isabel Connell?"

"No, but I think I've located the man named Carl Schultig. Are you looking for him?"

"And how! Where is he?"

"I'm meeting him at Penn Station, Gate 17, and —"

"Hold him!" Kilkenny ordered. "Stall him for five minutes. I'll be right over."

Katy stared at the phone for several minutes after hanging up. Then she headed back toward Gate 17.

She reached the pungent impersonality of the waiting crowd without seeing Schultig again.

She was looking at the concourse clock when someone took hold of her arm.

Katy started as she looked into a pair of cold blue eyes. One eye squinted a trifle, she noticed, as though holding an imaginary monocle.

"Mrs. Ward?" said Carl Schultig.

Katy wished she had not come. She shook her head. "No," she said. "You must be mistaken."

"I'm not mistaken," The man had a slight Teutonic accent. "I saw you with Isabel Connell last night. I know you are Mrs. Ward. You have something for me?"

"No — nothing."

"Isabel said you were a friend. Don't you want to help the girl, Mrs. Ward?"

"Yes, of course," Katy said. She no longer looked at Schultig. She stared straight ahead at Gate 17. Schultig tightened his grasp on her arm. He was walking her deeper into the crowd, slowly, half step by half step, pushing, wedging her into the press of travelers.

"Then give me the letter," Schultig said.

"I . . . I haven't got it with me," Katy lied. She still didn't look at Schultig. She knew she didn't sound convincing, but Kilkenny had told her to stall. She must keep talking.

"Where is it?" Schultig demanded.

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"Why, I — My husband has it," Katy said. On every side heads suddenly bowed in unison like a congregation at prayer. Gate 17 was open and Washington passengers stooped for their suitcases. The crowd began to move, pushing forward, pushing tighter around her, behind her. "My husband wasn't home when Isabel called," she went on, "but I thought I'd better come here to meet you anyhow. My husband must be home now, though, so if you will come with me you can get the letter for Isabel. Shall we start, Mr. Schultig?"

Mr. Schultig did not reply. In fact, Mr. Schultig was no longer at Katy's side. The crowd pushing against her had made her unaware that he was no longer grasping her arm. Automatically she looked down at her forearm.

Her handbag was gone.

Consternation, anger, despair, and sheepishness welled up inside of her in succeeding waves. She felt the color mounting to her cheeks. She looked about frantically. No Schultig. She was being sucked into Gate 17, pushed into the stairway to the underground platform, part of the living escalator going down.

Once on the platform, she scanned faces. She walked the length of the Washington train, peering into car windows. No Schultig.

She found a clear stairway and climbed again to the concourse. Kilkenny was waiting at Gate 17.

"I muffed it," Katy confessed. She told how Schultig had escaped in the crowd, carefully omitting the theft of her handbag. While she was talking, she felt Kilkenny's gaze carefully taking her apart, memorizing every detail of her expression, every crease of her clothing.

"Where's your handbag?" he demanded abruptly.

"I never carry a handbag."

"Women always carry handbags," the detective said.

"Not Katy Ward," said Katy. "Katy's the outdoor type."

"And Schultig's the bag-snatching type. What did you have in your bag that he wanted?"

"Well, *if* I carried a bag, there'd be lipstick, a compact —"

"Mrs. Ward, please! You don't think I missed your big keep-your-mouth-shut look when I asked your husband about that letter this morning, do you? I hope you had photostats made."

Katy felt the color mounting to her cheeks again. She tried to make it a flush of indignation. She said, "If you're such a smart detective, Mr. Kilkenny, why haven't *you* got the letter?"

"Don't need it," the detective said. "The D.A. may want it later for trial evidence, but I've got all the clues I need right now."

"You know who killed Grover?"

"Practically. One or two pieces don't quite fit, but I'll make them fit today — unless you and your fool husband mess things up. You better come back to West Twentieth Street with me, Mrs. Ward."

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Katy went meekly. She continued to be meek as the police car sped up the ramp from the interior of the railway station. She said, "I'm sorry I let Schultig get away, Mr. Kilkenny."

"We'll pick him up in a day or two when he comes to Idlewild for his luggage. He was in such a hurry to get to town yesterday that he didn't wait to claim his bags at the airport."

"Maybe he won't claim his bags if he thinks he's wanted for murder."

"He'll claim the bags. Or send for them. He won't abandon two hundred thousand dollars."

"Two hundred thousand dollars?"

"Diamonds," Kilkenny said. "We went through the luggage. Schultig was trying to smuggle in two hundred carats, at a grand a carat. Uncut stones in an aspirin bottle. Dozens of cut and polished stones packed in cotton and wadded into bottles."

"That's right, Schultig was a passenger from Amsterdam," Katy was remembering her jewelry-designing days. "Tulp Straat. That's where the diamonds came from, isn't it?"

"Originally," Kilkenny said, "but I think these diamonds came from Germany this trip. Our experts had a look at the cut stones and they say the diamonds are probably some the Germans stole when they invaded Holland in 1940."

"How can they tell?"

"The cut. Twentieth-century cut. Eighty-eight facets. But the experts tell me that nowadays the twentieth-century cut has only eighty facets. So the stones in Schultig's baggage must date back to some time before the Nazis looted Amsterdam . . . Well, here we are."

The car had stopped in front of the Tenth Precinct Police Station, headquarters of Homicide West. Katy followed Kilkenny through halls and stairways that smelled of fresh paint and stale tobacco smoke, of musty papers and perspiring policemen. They entered an office. Kilkenny motioned Katy to a chair without introducing her to his two colleagues seated at desks.

"Any breaks?" Kilkenny asked at large.

"We spotted Teller at Westover," one of the men said. "Dead-headed out of Gander. Due here any minute now."

"What's from the airport?"

"Nothing. Nobody's been near the baggage."

Kilkenny's phone rang. "Hello," the detective said. "Oh, hello, Colonel Leatherby." He moved the receiver two inches away from his cheek to save his eardrum. Leatherby's voice, high with excitement and loud with self-assurance, made the diaphragm vibrate with such vehemence that Katy could hear the metallic words across the desk.

"I've split it wide open, Kilkenny," declared the Colonel's voice. "You'd better hurry over, but I warn you that you may be too late."

"Where are you, Colonel?"

"I'm going to take him. It may not be easy because he's holed up here with that little airline stewardess. If

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he tries to shoot his way out, Kilkenny, I warn you, I'm going to shoot back. I'm a soldier, and —"

"Dammit, where are you?" Kilkenny yelled, making gestures at a colleague to put a tracer on the call.

"At 398 Park Avenue," the receiver rasped. "Fourteenth floor."

"You mean fifteenth? Sarassen's?"

"Sarassen has a duplex. Schultig is hiding out on the fourteenth."

"Be right over," the detective said. The receiver was still talking as he hung up. He scribbled something on a slip of paper and tossed it to the next desk.

"Prowl cars to this address, Brannigan," he said. "Emergency squad, too. May be doors to smash down."

"And me, Mr. Kilkenny?" Katy asked as the detective started for the door.

"Here," said Kilkenny, "Right here. Keep an eye on her, Brannigan. Both eyes."

The door slammed behind him.

Dave Ward was working on the lock of the upper right-hand drawer of the desk with his penknife when he heard a sound which raised his hackles — the muffled, syncopated drumbeat of gunfire.

The first three shots were muted jabs at his eardrums, obviously fired at some distance, although the droning echo indicated they were fired within the apartment. Two more shots followed at a few seconds' interval.

Footsteps pounded past the door, running into silence. Lighter footsteps pursued, running furtively. Something thumped against the heavy oak door. A key scratched at the lock, and Dave had a brief attack of Eighty-third Street stomach. He flattened himself against the wall as the door swung inward. Martin Sarassen backed in, a gun in his hand.

Dave picked up a carved tabouret.

Sarassen made the mistake of trying to double-lock the door. Dave aimed the tabouret against the back of his head.

Sarassen spun about in a glittering shower of splintered sandalwood and mother-of-pearl flakes, but he did not go down. He faced Dave, still grasping the gun.

Dave tackled low, below the line of fire, lifting the plump little man off his feet just as the gun exploded.

The flame seared Dave's neck. He heard the roar of the explosion with his whole body — all except his ears which sang painfully.

With all the leverage of his long arms and tall frame, he flung Sarassen against the wall, heard his head *plop* against the oak paneling. Sarassen collapsed into an inert heap. The gun slipped from his fingers.

A worm of fire was eating a bright expanding circle into the collar of Dave's coat. The smell of scorched wool mingled with the pungent scent of burned powder. Dave beat out the smoking circle with one hand, picked up the gun with the other. He opened the door, ducked out, then locked it again from the outside. His knowledge

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of firearms was limited to his basic training, but it was sufficient to tell him, after breaking the revolver, that only one shot had been fired. That left him five. He snapped the cylinder into place, cocked the revolver. His feet made no sound on the thick carpet as he started down the long corridor.

Dave, in fact, could hear no sound anywhere except the ringing in his ears. He opened two doors, cautiously, futilely. He opened a third door — and was immediately caught in an avalanche of towels, sheets, and pillowcases.

As he backed away, the giantess in cap and apron ran screaming from the linen closet. When she saw the gun in Dave's had, she screamed even louder and disappeared down the hall.

Dave followed. Once he thought he heard the wail of sirens, but decided it was just the ringing in his ears. At the end of the hall a marble staircase wound downward.

There were drops of blood on the marble steps. Dave stooped. The red splashes smeared beneath his touch.

The bloody trail vanished when it met the carpet. The stains were shaped like exclamation points. Dave was trying to remember something he had once read about the shape of the drops telling the direction in which the bleeding person was moving, when suddenly he heard someone coming up the stairs. The tread was slow and deliberate. Dave backtracked, hugging the wall.

Lieutenant-colonel Bertram Leatherby emerged from the stairway, a revolver in his hand. When he saw Ward, Leatherby started.

"What do you want here, Ward?"

"My wife," Dave said. "I'm looking for —"

"Get out! Quick! There's a murderer loose around here, Ward. Don't get caught in any cross-fire."

A door opened beside Dave. The corner of his eye caught a tangle of blonde curls. The door opened wider and he recognized Isabel Connell. She shouted something he didn't understand.

Dave saw a slight movement of Leatherby's arm. He heard a click. He sprang forward, his left fist tightening about the breech of Leatherby's gun, his fingers curling into the trigger guard, the ball of his thumb pushing between the hammer and the shell.

The next few seconds were confused. Dave remembered opening his mouth to speak just as Carl Schultig's pale, haggard face appeared behind Isabel — a disheveled Schultig with a bloody bandage around his upper right arm.

He did not see what hit him.

He heard a great cracking noise, suddenly felt very tired, and closed his eyes. He heard distant, unreal sounds, like voices in a dream. He knew he must not go on resting like this, because he still had not found Katy and he must find Katy. With a great effort he opened his eyes and was surprised to find himself sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall,

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and that there were dozens of men milling about.

He saw Kilkenny lining people against the wall. Another plain-clothesman was collecting firearms.

Then he saw Isabel kneeling beside him, dabbing some stinging antiseptic into a ragged tear at the base of his left thumb. Isabel. But no Katy.

"Where's my wife?" he demanded.

Isabel shook her head. Kilkenny, who was going through Schultig's pockets, answered without looking at Dave.

"Mrs. Ward is at the Tenth Precinct Station," he said, "where she can't mess things up, like some people I know."

Dave breathed deeply. "What hit me?" he asked.

"He did," Isabel said. She was tearing a handkerchief into strips, gesturing toward Leatherby. "You're going to have a beautiful shiner."

"What's the idea, Colonel?" Dave protested.

"You were protecting Schultig," Leatherby said. "Schultig would have shot me if the police hadn't arrived."

"That's a lie!" Isabel declared. "Schultig couldn't even hold a gun. His right arm is broken."

"He shot at me," Leatherby said.

"You fired first, Colonel."

"What about it, Schultig?" Kilkenny asked.

Schultig, his eyes dulled by pain, moved his thin white lips. But before he could reply, Leatherby broke in with: "Master-Sergeant Schultig is under military arrest. As his commanding officer, I forbid him to make any statement pending his trial by court-martial."

Dave watched Isabel's hands as she wound the bandage. He stared at her wrist watch, puzzled. The watch indicated the time as half-past 6 — and it couldn't possibly be that late. He had come to Sarassen's apartment before 1 o'clock. Had he been unconscious for five hours? Unlikely . . .

Suddenly he remembered what Isabel had said in the taxi on the way to Eighty-third Street, when she twice asked the time.

"Hey, Kenny," he said. "Come look at the girl's watch."

"So what?" the detective said. "It's stopped."

"It's *not* stopped," Dave said. "Isabel, tell him why your watch says it's 6.30."

"That's Greenwich time," Isabel explained. "G.M.T. is five hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. Trans-Atlantic aircraft cross half a dozen time zones in one flight, so they all operate on Greenwich time."

"In other words," Dave pursued, "if the arrival of a M.A.T.S. plane was logged at 1630, the passenger would really land at Westover at 11.30 A.M., Eastern Standard Time. That would give the passenger plenty of time to get to New York and up to West Eighty-third Street before four o'clock, wouldn't it?"

"Right," Isabel agreed.

Dave grinned at Kilkenny. A curious expression flickered across the detective's face as he realized how

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simply Colonel Leatherby's alibi had been destroyed. He gave Dave a reluctant nod of admiration, plucked a pair of handcuffs from the hip pocket of a colleague, and snapped them on Bertram Leatherby.

"You're crazy, Kilkenny," Leatherby said. "I tell you Schultig —"

"Schultig was in Amsterdam the night Lily Pons sang at Bad Grienenheim. Did you enjoy the concert, Colonel?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You dropped a U.S.O. ticket stub in Grover's apartment. You're the only person who could have dropped a Monday night stub from a theatre in Germany."

"I was in Grover's apartment after the murder," Leatherby said.

"We found the stub before you made your official appearance," Kilkenny said evenly. "Come on, boys, we're going downtown. Chambers, call the D.A.'s office for a deputy to take statements."

"Just a minute, Kenny." Dave produced a key from his pocket. "If you also want a statement from Sarassen, you'll find him locked in a room at the end of the hall."

"Ward, you're a damned fool," Kilkenny declared, but he grinned as he said it. . . .

Dave wanted to go to some swank restaurant but Katy convinced him that he should not flaunt his magnificent black eye in public. So he stayed home and put wet compresses on it while Katy officiated at the two-burner gas plate in the kitchen.

"Come and get it, Hero," Katy said as she served the steak.

"Hero, my good eye!" Dave protested.

"A typical Ward build-up," Katy continued. "Once it was camels in the Waldorf. Then it was midgets. Now its murder, with Our Dave catching crooks and saving lives all over the place. But it won't work this time, Dave. I'm still flying to California tomorrow. I hope we get Kilkenny's fill-in before I go."

"Kenny promised he'd come over after dinner," Dave said.

The detective arrived with a bottle of bourbon, his awkward thanks, and a transcript of all the witnesses' statements in the case of The People vs. Leatherby.

Colonel Leatherby, the detective explained, had been in cahoots with one Baron von Taube, a former bigwig in the Nazi military government of Holland. Leatherby had allowed the Baron to live quietly in his *schloss* near Grienenheim, free of persecution for Nazi war crimes, in return for a substantial share of the diamonds the Nazis had stolen from Amsterdam. Leatherby was bootlegging the diamonds in the United States.

"A young Pfc. named Bill Teller got wind of the racket and reported his suspicions to his immediate superior, Captain Tom Grover," Kilkenny went on. "As a result, young Teller was arrested by Leatherby and held incommunicado. Grover was transferred out of the theatre and

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sent home for discharge — but not before he had intercepted a cable from the colonel to Martin Sarassen.

"On his way home, Grover met young Teller's brother at Gander and told him that as soon as he had concrete evidence against Leatherby, he would go to Washington with the whole story. Young Teller's friends were still trying to get the goods on the colonel.

"On Monday a M.A.T.S. pilot showed up at Gander with a letter to Baron von Taube in Leatherby's own handwriting. This looked like the clincher, so Jeff Teller gave it to Isabel for delivery to Grover."

"How does Schultig fit in?" Dave interrupted.

"Schultig was a Swiss-born interpreter for the U.S. Army, later assigned to the C.I.D. as an investigator. When Leatherby saw that things were getting hot, he sent Schultig to New York to take the temperature. Schultig thought he was investigating a diamond-smuggling ring operated by the Teller brothers and Tom Grover. He was instructed to stop off in Amsterdam to find out what was known there about the diamonds that Baron van Taube had taken years before.

"When Schultig left Germany, Leatherby gave him samples for a New York drug importer named Sarassen. Schultig didn't know what the bottles really contained.

"In Gander, Schultig spied on Jeff Teller and saw him hand Isabel the letter for Grover. When he phoned Grover from the New York airport, something Grover said gave him his first inkling that the whole deal stank. However, he continued to follow orders, stole Isabel's bag, but the letter was not in the bag . . .

"How did Schultig get the key to Grover's apartment?" Dave asked.

"From Sarassen. Schultig wasn't seeing Grover until after five, so he phoned Sarassen first and Sarassen insisted on seeing him immediately. Sarassen was anxious, naturally, to get his hands on the 'drug samples.' "

"And how did he catch Isabel?"

"Sarassen had trailed Isabel to your apartment and then planted Schultig outside the place to grab her. He couldn't do anything until after she left Mrs. Ward. By this time Schultig knew which side he was on, so he decided to hide Isabel right under Sarassen's nose. He took her to Park Avenue and hid her in the suite Sarassen had given him.

"He told Sarassen and Leatherby that he had lost Isabel's trail. They were furious. They wanted to go to Idlewild and pick up Schultig's luggage, but he convinced them it was being watched. It was midmorning before both men left the apartment and Schultig could get Isabel to a phone to call the Ward number. By this time he was sure the letter would button up the case.

"The next part I know," Katy said.

"When Schultig returned to Park Avenue from Penn Station, Leatherby followed him to his suite and saw Isabel. The colonel fired three shots,

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all wild. Schultig fired once before Leatherby winged him. Leatherby thought he'd killed him and immediately phoned the police to establish a self-defense alibi by announcing the shooting as about to happen . . . Sarassen? The Feds will take care of him."

The doorbell rang. Isabel and Jeff Teller came in, carrying two bottles of champagne.

"We want you to celebrate with us," Isabel said. "We're driving to Maryland tonight to get married. The wine's cold. Pop it, Dave."

As the wine fizzed, Dave said, "Happy days."

"I hope we'll be as happy as the Wards," Isabel said.

"Happier," Katy suggested.

The doorbell rang again. Ben Smock came in, mopping his red face.

"I been trying to get you all day — Good lord, Dave, what happened to your eye?"

"I ran into a swinging colonel."

Smock roared. "Look, Dave," he said. "I want you should write a release about Hollywood buying the movie rights to *The Affairs of Gwendolyn*. Paramet Pictures closed the deal this afternoon for a hundred thousand dollars."

"A hundred grand?" Dave sat down suddenly.

"I tried to hold out for a hundred fifty," Smock said. "But this guy Cuadra's agent insisted we close for a hundred right away. You think Cuadra will be mad?"

"No," Dave replied. "I don't think Cuadra will be mad."

There was a long pause. Katy looked at Dave curiously. Kilkenny drained his glass and announced he was going home to get some sleep. Isabel and Teller said goodbye and Ben Smock also had to leave.

When everyone had gone, there was another long silence. Then Katy said, "I've been trying to remember my high school Spanish. Seems to me there's a Spanish word *cuadra* that has something to do with a hospital. *Cuadra* means 'ward,' doesn't it?"

Dave said nothing.

"Why didn't you tell me it was you who wrote that terrible play?" Katy pursued.

"I was afraid you'd laugh at me."

"Well, anyway you're going to make a lot of dough out of it," Katy mused. "In a way I'm sorry. I was on the point of changing my mind about California, but I can't now, because people will think it's because you hit the jackpot."

"You go on and fly to the Coast tomorrow, Katy," Dave said. "Only when you start looking for an apartment, don't get one that's too small."

"You mean you'll follow me?"

"Sure, I'll follow you."

"And no more nonsense? No more camels in the Waldorf?"

"No more camels, no more midgets — and no more murders."

Katy gave him a funny smile. Then she kissed him.

"I don't believe it," she said, "but I'll take the chance."

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